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MARCH 2, 2020

4 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
13 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Jelani Cobb on criminal justice and the election; the body revealed; fishing with Huey Lewis; subterranean cartography; a Trumpian revival.

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

Jennifer Gonnerman 18 Burden of Proof
The fight to overturn a pair of murder convictions.

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Eli Coyote Mandel 25 X-treme Rules of the X.F.L.

PERSONAL HISTORY

David Sedaris 26 Unbuttoned
Conversations between father and son.

A REPORTER AT LARGE

Nick Paumgarten 32 The Altitude Sickness
The psychic toll of mountain climbing.

PROFILES

Jonathan Blitzer 44 Get Out
Stephen Miller's punitive immigration agenda.

FICTION

Adam Levin 54 "Kid Positive"

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

Hannah Fry 61 *Experimentation in the age of Big Data.*
65 Briefly Noted
Jonathan Dee 66 *James McBride's "Deacon King Kong."*

THE ART WORLD

Peter Schjeldahl 68 *The power of Mexico's muralists.*

POP MUSIC

Carrie Battan 70 *Beach Bunny's début album.*

THE THEATRE

Alexandra Schwartz 72 *Ivo van Hove takes on "West Side Story."*

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Anthony Lane 74 *"The Call of the Wild," "Emma."*

POEMS

Peter Balakian 50 "Zucchini"
Diane Mehta 58 "Bunches of a Nest"

COVER

Barry Blitt "All That Money Can Buy"

DRAWINGS *Amy Hwang, Julia Suits, Maggie Larson, David Sipress, Emily Flake, Joe Dator, Lars Kenseth, Frank Cotham, Liana Finck, Liz Montague, William Haefeli* SPOTS *Ivan Brunetti*

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

Samin Nosrat talks to Helen Rosner about fame, veganism, depression, and writing her new cookbook.

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Why do we need politicians? Nathan Heller on Hélène Landemore's ideas for shifting power back to the many.

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LEFT: AYSIA STIEB FOR THE NEW YORKER; RIGHT: ROSE WONG

THE MAIL

FIFTY SHADES OF GAY

Masha Gessen, in an explanation of why some say that Pete Buttigieg is "not gay enough," mirrors the regressive positions Gessen usually rails against ("The Queer Opposition to Pete Buttigieg, Explained," newyorker.com/gessen-on-buttigieg, February 12th). As a temperamentally conservative white Christian man, Buttigieg is as palatable as gay people get—a fact that makes this moment in queer history anticlimactic for the nonwhite, non-cisgender, non-male individuals who don't relate to the queerness that America is most comfortable with. But the milquetoast quality of Buttigieg's gay identity, and the way he emphasizes his blandness in exchange for political acceptance, shouldn't make him a target of accusations that he's not gay in the way that people would like him to be. Gessen blames him for projecting an image that panders to skittish heterosexuals, instead of criticizing our political system, which is so concerned with the emotional equilibrium of the white cis-het majority that such pandering has become a prerequisite. The *Time* magazine cover photo of Buttigieg and his husband is disturbing not because of what Gessen calls their "awkwardly minimal touching," but because such obsequious posturing is still necessary for maintaining one's safety in America.

Anna Morrissey
Marlboro, Vt.

THE COST OF TIDYING UP

I was excited to read Jia Tolentino's analysis of the new literature of minimalist decluttering, but I would have liked to know more about where all the unwanted objects should go (Books, February 3rd). More often than not, the trash bags we're instructed to tote triumphantly out of our homes end up in a landfill; thrift stores send a large proportion of their donations to the dump. And it's difficult to stomach literature about the wealthy streamlining their closets in pursuit of spiritual clarity when many people survive with much less. Minimalism, it would seem, is only a design aesthetic for those able to choose it.

Linni Kral
Brooklyn, N.Y.

POLE VAULTING

Charles Bethea, in his piece about the controversy over Colin O'Brady's status as the first to cross Antarctica alone and unassisted, astutely observes that the feats of modern polar explorers are generally just "a little bit different and a little bit harder than the many very, very hard things that have been done before" ("The Polar Explorer Colin O'Brady and the Problem with 'Firsts,'" newyorker.com/bethea-on-antarctica, February 14th). Although this is generally true, it is not, as Bethea mentions, the issue at the heart of the debate over O'Brady, whom the world's preëminent polar explorers have accused of misrepresenting the significance of his accomplishment. No one had previously skied O'Brady's route not because it was impossible but because, as the explorer Eric Larsen has put it, "no one thought it was worthwhile, in the sense of being anything record-breaking": the final three hundred and sixty-six miles of O'Brady's route followed a frozen road used to haul supplies to the research base at the South Pole—a road that is regularly groomed by snowcats and marked every quarter of a mile with flagged posts. The use of this road, Larsen correctly states, makes any claim that O'Brady made an unassisted solo crossing "an outright lie."

Jon Krakauer
Boulder, Colo.

•

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Rouge can be a color of love, boldness, and vibrance; for **Yuna,** who dropped an album named for the rosy hue in July, it seems to embody all of those things and then some. Where the singer's earlier releases tended toward chillier sonic shades, her latest—a collaborative collection of R. & B.-infused pop as polished as it is bright—feels warm and more confident than ever, an apt progression for the Malaysian star. This week, her "Rouge" finds a perfect contrast at Blue Note in six acoustic shows, running Feb. 27-29.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MACIEK JASIK

ART

"Peter Saul: Crime and Punishment"

New Museum

The timeliest as well as the rudest painting show of this winter happens to be the first-ever New York museum survey of this American aesthetic rapscallion. Recognition so delayed bemuses almost as much as a reminder of the artist's current age: eighty-five, which seems impossible. Saul's cartoony style—raucously grotesque, often with contorted figures engaged in (and quite enjoying) intricate violence, caricatures of politicians from Nixon to Trump that come off as much fond as fierce, and cheeky travesties of classic paintings by Rembrandt, Picasso, and de Kooning—suggests the gall of an adolescent allowed to run amok. It takes time to become aware of how well Saul paints, with lyrically kinetic, intertwined forms and an improbable approximation of chiaroscuro, managed with neon-toned Day-Glo acrylics. He sneaks whispery formal nuances into works whose predominant effect may be as subtle as that of a steel garbage can being kicked downstairs. Not everyone takes the time. Saul's effrontery has long driven fastidious souls, including me years ago, from galleries. Now I see him as part of a story of art and culture that has been unspooling since the nineteen-fifties; one in which Saul, formerly a pariah, seems ever more a paladin.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Through May 31.)*

Gladys Nilsson

Greenan

CHELSEA The new paintings in this exhibition teem with alien vegetation and freewheeling creatures—evidence that age hasn't slowed this Chicago artist, who is now seventy-nine. The orgiastic, nine-foot-long "Gleefully Askew," from 2017, shows a cartoonish orange woman, nude but for a ruffled apron, painting with a preternaturally long, flexible arm. Two men serve as her unsteady easel. At the Matthew Marks gallery, a companion survey charts Nilsson's course from the nineteen-sixties, when she was a member of the Hairy Who (a subset of the Chicago Imagists), through 1980. The lurid palette and Expressionist style of Nilsson's early works—such as "Nightclub," from 1964, with its goblin face and cabaret dancers—give way to fantastic abandon and goofily sexual Boschian detail. The painter's most seductive scenes are busy with anthropomorphic shapes and pulsating patterns that spill onto her sculptural frames. A dusky, speckled landscape of abstract succulent and animal forms, from 1973, is characteristic of the artist's exuberant approach—its title, "More," could be the motto of her prodigious career.—*Johanna Fateman (Through March 14.)*

Senta Simond

Danziger

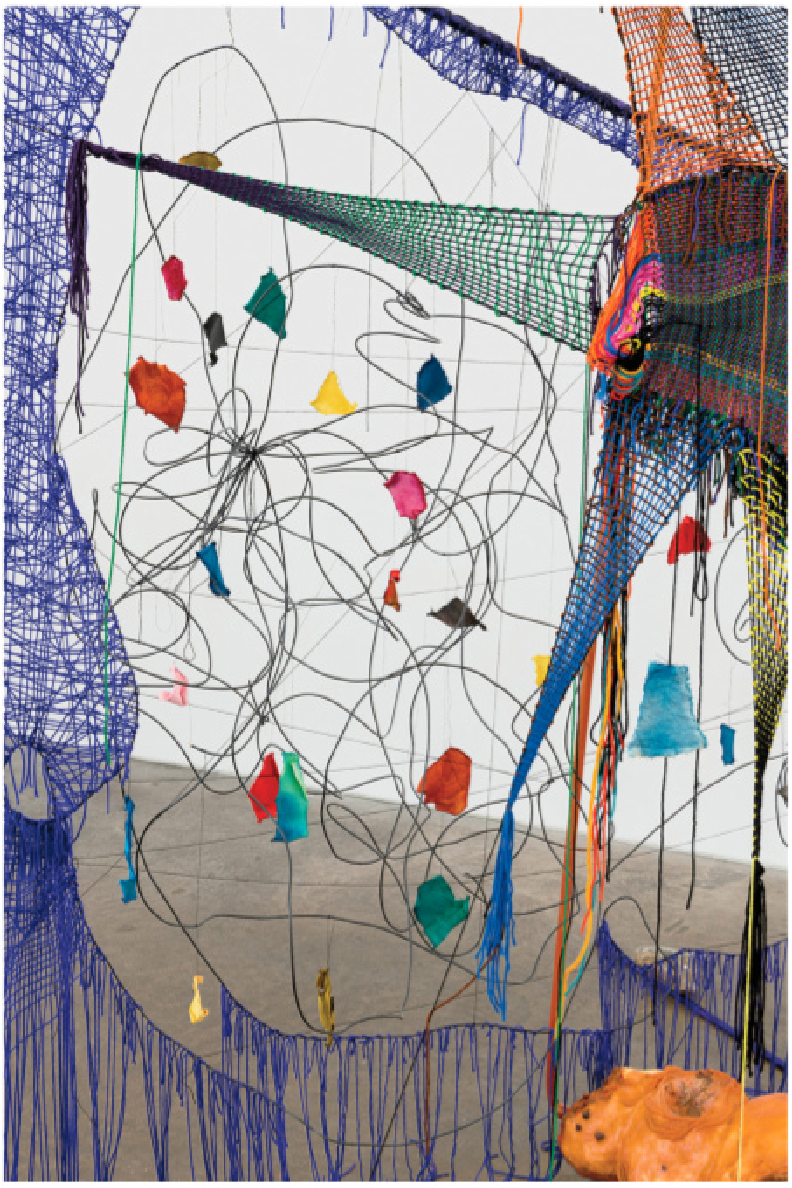
UPTOWN This young Swiss photographer shoots her beautiful subjects in natural light, and in the platonic-erotic glow of close friendship. Simond credits the intimate, spontaneous mood of her portraits to her unfussy process: she enlists women she knows (some have been her models for a decade) and uses minimal equipment in non-studio settings. Familiarity and trust yield transfixing images of sexual self-possession—images that once might have been said to smack of the male gaze. The fifteen black-and-white pictures in Simond's U.S. début show women in deep thought and states of undress, their uninhibited poses made thrilling by the artist's bold camera angles, cropped compositions, and unmistakable fascination. The silvery photographs, in their chic metal frames, have a vintage cinematic quality, but exact allusions are hard to pin down. The young subject of the portrait "Soumeya," who wears a white poet's blouse, her dark mane arcing over her downcast face, might be from yesterday, from the early twentieth century, or from a period drama—though which period is hard to say.—*J.F. (Through Feb. 29.)*

"Sounds Lasting and Leaving"

Luxembourg & Dayan

UPTOWN Taking its title from an intriguing note about "musical sculpture" from Marcel Duchamp, this century-spanning exhibition of sound works (broadly defined) establishes a surprising lineage of artists who have explored overlaps of the aural and the optical. Marina Abramović provides a dramatic start with her black-and-white film "Freeing the Voice," from 1975, which documents a performance in which she wailed until her vocal cords gave out. A simple Calder mobile, from 1940, descriptively titled "Red Disc and Gong," makes a subtler statement—its horizontally suspended mallet promises to, eventually, gently strike a piece of sheet metal. Also on view are more recent works by contemporary artists. Derrick Adams and Philippe Treuille draw on Calder's sonic experiments with the composer Edgard Varèse, pairing an original score with

AT THE GALLERIES



COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND DEREK ELLER GALLERY

Picture Alexander Calder weaving dream catchers at Stonehenge. The results might resemble the superbly weird sculptures of **Michelle Segre.** The native New Yorker's colorful concatenations begin with yarn, metal, paint, wire, and thread, and extend to ingredients that are so sorcerous they might as well include eye of newt. Three recent examples of Segre's irresistible work (including "Just Why Do You Think You're a Plant?," above) are on view, downtown, at the Derek Eller gallery (through March 8). Uptown, at Ceysson & Bénétière (through March 14), Segre has convened ten like-minded artists in a dynamic group show, titled "Cult of the Crimson Queen."—*Andrea K. Scott* poetry from the Harlem Renaissance. Jennie C. Jones's collage "Slowly in a Silent Way, Caged," from 2010, combines pieces by Miles Davis and John Cage, similarly breathing new life into past experiments.—*J.F. (Through March 14.)*

THE THEATRE

Anatomy of a Suicide
Atlantic Theatre Company

The young British playwright Alice Birch ("Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.") has acknowledged Caryl Churchill as an influence on her work; this is evident in Birch's new play, a rare case in which form and content are inextricably linked, where a cerebral exercise doesn't hinder feeling. The stories of three generations of women unfurl simultaneously onstage, as if on a split screen. Carol (Carla Gugino) wants to end her life, but tries to keep going for the sake of her daughter, Anna (Celeste Arias), who ends up just as tormented as her mother. This tragic legacy weighs heavily on Anna's daughter, Bonnie (Gabby Beans), who denies herself emotional commitments in an attempt to break the cycle. The director Lileana Blain-Cruz and her cast skillfully navigate the challenging setup, suggesting desperately interlocked narratives that, miraculously, never feel morbid.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through March 15.)*

Darling Grenadine
Black Box, Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre

Staged in the round in the Roundabout's smallest space, Daniel Zaitchik's gorgeous new musical, directed and choreographed by Michael Berresse, begins in the guise of a sweet, charming rom-com before shifting, painfully and irrevocably, into a darker show about alcoholism. The cast is superb: Adam Kantor as Harry, a composer of jingles; Jay Armstrong Johnson as his barkeep brother, Paul; Emily Walton as Louise, a Broadway understudy (a situation that occasions several clever show-within-a-show songs); and Aury Krebs and Matt Dallal, excellent as everyone else—plus the trumpet player Mike Nappi, who conjures Harry's dog (also named Paul) with his horn's squeaks and whimpers. Edward T. Morris's mostly hand-drawn animated backdrops are a perfect complement to Zaitchik's fresh and soulful tunes. It's a rare treat to catch a play like this in such an intimate room before it moves to bigger stages.—*Rollo Romig (Through March 15.)*

Hamlet
St. Ann's Warehouse

When a guard declares, with grave alarm, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," in Gate Theatre Dublin's alluring production of "Hamlet," there's no doubt about the serious tragedy that's to come. This "Hamlet" is, after all, serious—or at least seriously stylish, with dapper suits and stage smoke. Figures posture on Susan Hilferty's exquisitely designed set as though they're in an editorial fashion shoot. Yaël Farber's direction is meticulously artful, with an eye for affect, but the production occasionally falls for its own romance. Ruth Negga's Danish prince is a case in point—her youthful, androgynous Hamlet is captivating, but her performance, rife with head cocks, slouches, and sharp spasms of movement, overstates itself in gesture. (Gavin Drea's raging, woeful Laertes, however, is a treat.) The casting—a female, mixed-race Hamlet, a black murdered king—queers and racializes "Hamlet" and calls into question the original text's relationships with gender and sexuality, but the production stops short of saying something definitive.—*Maya Phillips (Through March 8.)*

A Peregrine Falls
Wild Project

If there is a silver lining to real-world tragedy, it is that the memory of it might one day serve as grist for art. In writing this richly dark and rending drama, Leegrid Stevens drew on a painful chapter of his own family story, terminating in an older relative's imprisonment for an unspeakable crime committed years before. The play starts off placidly enough, with a woman visiting her parents with the happy news of a pregnancy. Each revelation that follows has the punishing force of a knife twisting in flesh. The scenic design, by Zoë Hurwitz, is cold and ominous, and the precisely calibrated shifts in lighting, by Simon Cleveland, reinforce the fitful shifts in mood. But the committed performances—notably by Sidney Williams, in his sympathetic rendering of a lapsed Mormon—and Padraic Lillis's controlled and sensitive direction are what carry this Loading Dock production's emotional weight.—*David Kortava (Through Feb. 29.)*

A Photograph: Lovers in Motion
Theatre 80

Ntozake Shange's follow-up to her best-known work, "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf," and her only dialogue-driven play, centers on creative inspirations and complicated relationships in a photographer's San Francisco apartment in the late nineteen-seventies. As directed and adapted by Shange's sister and collaborator, Ifa Bayeza,

ON BROADWAY

ILLUSTRATION BY LIBBY VANDERPLOEG

"Company" is, I think, the first irrefutably postmodern musical, one that's geared not toward marriage as a resolution so much as toward a shaky self-realization that we are all alone, no matter how much we think we should dress it up by playing wife or husband or loving godfather. First produced on Broadway in 1970, the show contains some of the composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim's legendary early songs—"Being Alive," "The Ladies Who Lunch"—which shimmer with a knowingness about what humans don't know about themselves. Originally, the musical centered on Bobby, a thirty-five-year-old bachelor wrestling with what he observes in his friends' marriages, but, in the director Marianne Elliott's interpretation, which starts previews on March 2, at the Jacobs, Bobby is Bobbie (Katrina Lenk), a single woman living in downtown Manhattan. Though the gender switch will no doubt cast the text in a different light, the loneliness and the humor at the heart of Sondheim's triumph will surely remain, just shown through a new lens at this ever-changing time.—*Hilton Als* for the Negro Ensemble Company, the scenes in Shange's signature "choreopoem" style shine brightest, especially those anchored by a dancer named Michael (Imana Breaux). The more naturalistic scenes have a repetitive quality (the running time approaches three hours) and lean heavily on stereotypes—which could be seen as a shortcoming, but seems intended to show how the characters have been damaged by a racist and patriarchal world. Hot tunes composed by the saxophone great David Murray summon the ghosts of Theatre 80, whose previous incarnation was a storied jazz club.—*R.R. (Through Feb. 29.)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet
David H. Koch

The choreographer (and occasional dancer) Justin Peck has been incredibly busy in the past two years, choreographing for Broadway ("Carousel") and then for Hollywood (the upcoming Spielberg version of "West Side Story"), so it's no surprise that he hasn't been around his alma mater much of late. On Feb. 26, he returns with a new ballet, "Rotunda," set to a commissioned score by Nico Muhly. (This will be their first collaboration for City Ballet, though Muhly has composed extensively for dance, notably for Benjamin Millepied.) "Rotunda" is the centerpiece of a program that opens with "In G Major," a summery romp by Jerome Robbins, whose work is one of Peck's greatest sources of inspiration. The flashy "DGV: Danse à Grande Vitesse," by Christopher Wheeldon, closes the evening.—*Marina Harss (Through March 1.)*

Sara Juli
Dixon Place

Juli's autobiographical shows are like stand-up-comedy routines with dance interludes. In her 2015 work "Tense Vagina," she took on motherhood, looking for humor in the postpartum loss of bladder control and other indignities. In her latest, "Burnt-Out Wife," she asks whether she should stay married, considering the usual sacrifices. She sings in the bathtub. She makes the conflicting desires of spouses into a dance.—*Brian Seibert (Feb. 27-28.)*

Platform 2020
Danspace Project

Danspace Project's monthlong, artist-curated series "Platform 2020: Utterances from the Chorus" is concerned with collective song: with the voice and the body and practices shared among artists and audiences. Organized by Judy Hussie-Taylor and the MacArthur grant-winning choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili, it is anchored, on Friday nights, by four hours of "Sitting on a Man's Head." The name is taken from protests used by Nigerian women to shame colonial officials into action, but here there is no shaming and the goal is healing rather than redress. Guests may join the artists in walking closely together, very slowly, as improvised sound and song emerge in response to the question "What do you carry that carries you?"—*B.S. (Feb. 28. Through March 21.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY ELENI KALORKOTI

CONTEMPORARY DANCE

As fail-safe vehicles of spiritual uplift, not many works of the past two decades approach "Grace," a dance that **Ronald K. Brown** made for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in 1999. It's not that the piece is blind to struggle—the lyrics of the Duke Ellington spiritual in its sound score plead for the Lord to come down and "see my people through." Yet the path toward salvation is clear, and so, especially, is the groove, irresistibly expressed in Brown's African-inspired moves. That's also true of his piece "High Life," from 2000, even though that dance of migration starts with a slave auction. Brown's "Mercy," created last year, is different. Set to a hazy score by Meshell Ndegeocello, it's much foggier, gloomier, attuned to the bleak, disorienting present. When Brown's company, Evidence, performs all three of these works during its thirty-fifth-anniversary programs at the Joyce Theatre, Feb. 25-March 1, audiences can acknowledge the darkness and be reminded of the light.—*Brian Seibert*

Daniel Léveillé Danse
92nd Street Y

The 92nd Street Y's Harkness Dance Festival continues with this Montreal-based troupe. In Catherine Gaudet's "The Fading of the Marvelous," five performers, nearly nude, stand side by side, stare at the audience, and walk forward and back slowly. Very gradually, their bodies contort, until the tension snaps and they cry like babies and skip like bacchantes. The walking becomes strutting, then slo-mo writhing that breaks down into rhythmic jerking and grunting—typical dance-orgy stuff.—*B.S. (Feb. 28-29.)*

Step Afrika!
New Victory

Stepping, a dance form that uses the whole body as a percussive instrument, was popularized by fraternities at historically black colleges, and it has spread into pop culture—TV dance shows, Beyoncé routines—as well as onto the concert stage. The company Step Afrika! has further expanded the scope of the style, infusing it with storytelling and influences such as African dance and hip-hop. "Drumfolk," the troupe's latest evening-length show, takes as its starting point a 1739 slave uprising in South Carolina that led to the banning of drum playing by African-Americans, which the local white population perceived as a threat; in response, the local African-American population turned to body percussion. Through dance, the company tells a story of ingenuity and survival.—*M.H. (Feb. 28-March 15.)*

Ballet Vlaanderen
Joyce Theatre

For its fiftieth anniversary and its New York début, this Antwerp-based company brings a potpourri of dances by three luminaries of the contemporary-dance scene: Akram Khan, Crystal Pite, and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, the ensemble's current director. "Kaash," a relatively early work by Khan, is strongly influenced by his training in the Indian classical-dance form kathak. Pite's "Ten Duets on a Theme of Rescue" was originally made for Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet; the duets, set to electronic music, explore themes of tenderness, isolation, and compassion in a fluid, ribbonlike language. Cherkaoui's "Faun" expands on Nijinsky's 1912 work for the Ballets Russes "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune."—*M.H. (March 3-7.)*

NEW MUSIC

“Ecstatic Music”—established as a festival, in 2011, by New Amsterdam, a bold upstart record label and concert presenter, and the Kaufman Music Center, a mainstream institution hungry for fresh and offbeat ideas—has quickly cemented its reputation as a hotbed for visionary artistic hybridity. Curated by the composer Judd Greenstein, the event has now expanded to a season-long series, its regular presence a happy reminder of the explosive possibilities of collaboration. The latest offering, coming to Merkin Hall on Feb. 29, is a perfect illustration: Missy Mazzoli, whose career path extends from D.I.Y. touring to the Metropolitan Opera, joins Kelly Moran, a deft composer and pianist whose recent work with the electronic-music act Oneohtrix Point Never brought her kinetic sounds to a whole new constituency.—*Steve Smith*

ILLUSTRATION BY CATHRYN VIRGINIA

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Bearthoven

Le Poisson Rouge

Bearthoven—a new-music chamber ensemble comprising the pianist Karl Larson, the bassist Pat Swoboda, and the percussionist Matthew Evans—looks pretty much exactly like a conventional jazz trio, and the thrilling empathy in its sound amounts to swing by another name. The group’s annual “New Works” concert vividly demonstrates the versatility and the range of its players in custom-tailored pieces. This year’s event introduces commissions by Michael Gordon and Shelley Washington and includes an opening set by Popebama, a slippery duo made up of the saxophonist Erin Rogers and the percussionist Dennis Sullivan.—*Steve Smith (Feb. 27 at 7:30.)*

Ann Hallenberg

Zankel Hall

Sweden has given us some of the world’s greatest opera singers: Jenny Lind, Birgit Nilsson, Anne Sofie von Otter, and Ingvar Wixell, among others. Here, the Swedish mezzo-soprano Ann Hallenberg, joined by the Venice Baroque Orchestra, pays tribute to Lind, arguably the most famous singer of the nineteenth century, with a collection of suitably dramatic and heartrending arias from masters of Baroque opera—Vivaldi, Handel, Torri, and Riccardo Broschi (otherwise known as Farinelli’s brother) are all in the queue. Also playing: The pianist Yuja Wang brings her remarkable musicianship and unmatched flair to Carnegie’s main stage for a recital of pieces by Brahms, Chopin, and Scriabin, interspersed with rarer delicacies from Galuppi and Mompou (Feb. 28).—*Hélène Werner (Feb. 27 at 7:30.)*

Nicole Mitchell

Jewish Museum

An improvising flutist, vocalist, composer, and bandleader far too protean to be constrained by rigid notions of genre, Nicole Mitchell comes to the Jewish Museum under the auspices of a series, produced by Bang on a Can, that is focussed on musical expressions of personal identity. Matape, Mitchell’s trio with Chad Taylor on drums and Val Jeanty on percussion and electronics, pursues a trajectory that extends from primal tones and rhythms to futuristic permutations.—*S.S. (Feb. 27 at 7:30.)*

New York Philharmonic

David Geffen Hall

Franz Welser-Möst, the musical director of the storied Cleveland Orchestra since 2002, returns to the New York Philharmonic with a pair of works that are stylistically disparate yet similarly picturesque and evocative. Up first, in its U.S. première, is an orchestral suite from “Babylon,” a stormy 2004 opera by Jörg Widmann. Richard Strauss’s “Symphonia Domestica” follows, exalting mundane details of everyday life to heroic proportions.—*S.S. (Feb. 27 at 7:30, Feb. 28 at 2, and Feb. 29 at 8.)*

“Intimate Apparel”

Mitzi E. Newhouse

Ricky Ian Gordon’s operas return again and again to American subject matter. He drifted on the open plains in “The Grapes of Wrath,” ran with the Texas wind in “A Coffin in Egypt,” and conjured the literary expatriate Gertrude Stein holding court in Parisian salons in “27.” Now, in his latest work, Gordon sets early-twentieth-century Manhattan to music with his adaptation of Lynn Nottage’s play “Intimate Apparel.” Kearstin Piper Brown takes the role of Esther—for which Viola Davis won a Drama Desk Award, in 2004, during the play’s Off Broadway run—an African-American seamstress with a gift for constructing tantalizing undergarments. (Chabrelle Williams plays Esther in the Wednesday and Saturday matinées.) Bartlett Sher directs, and Steven Osgood conducts.—*Oussama Zahr (Feb. 27-29 and March 3 at 8 and March 1 at 3.)*

Ali Stroker

Appel Room

Last year, Ali Stroker won a Tony for singing the house down with her clean, propulsive belt in Daniel Fish’s provocative revival of “Oklahoma!” In doing so, she made history as the first actor in a wheelchair to win Broadway’s highest honor; now she makes her début in Lincoln Center’s “American Songbook” series with a solo concert backed by a four-person band.—*O.Z. (Feb. 28 at 8:30.)*

“Agrippina”

Metropolitan Opera House

Handel’s “Agrippina” is an unlikely comic satire of political corruption in ancient Rome, and David McVicar’s staging updates it, rather effortlessly, to the present day. For the opera’s Met première, Joyce DiDonato sings the title role of the conniving empress, who elevates her son Nero to the throne, with loads of personal allure and Handelian flair, making her a force to be reckoned with. The opera coalesces around her performance as a power-grabbing First Lady, as it should, with Kate Lindsey (a live-wire Nerone), Brenda Rae (an appealing Poppea), Iestyn Davies (a dignified Ottone), and Matthew Rose (a bumbling Claudio) filling out the cast; Harry Bicket leads the orchestra with a sumptuous touch.—*O.Z. (Feb. 29 at 1 and March 3 at 7:30.)*

Cristina Spinei

National Sawdust

Cristina Spinei wanted to be a ballerina. Instead, she became a pianist and a composer and has devoted her burgeoning career to the exploration of physical movement through music; her first album, “Music for Dance,” grew out of a collaboration with choreographers. To mark the release of her second album, Spinei presents a program of instrumental music at National Sawdust. In solo piano pieces and intimate chamber works, including “Superstitions,” a 2017 commission from the Nashville Ballet, she demonstrates her self-proclaimed “minimalish” style and her innovative uses of the rhythms and patterns of dance. Performing with Spinei are colleagues from Nashville, where she’s currently based, and the cellist Emily Brausa.—*H.W. (Feb. 29 at 7.)*

Daniil Trifonov

Alice Tully Hall

Daniil Trifonov, an elegant weaver of piano melodies, takes on the almost mathematical precision of Bach’s counterpoint with a recital dedicated to his work. Two brief pieces—including Hess's arrangement of the heart-filling "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring"—bookend a traversal of "The Art of the Fugue," in which Bach braided voices in double, triple, and quadruple fugues to create vibrant tapestries of sound.—*O.Z. (March 3 at 7:30.)*

NIGHT LIFE

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Bruce Barth
Soapbox Gallery

Although best known for beguiling work with trios and small ensembles, the pianist Bruce Barth can also cast an enchanting spell as a solo performer. This recently opened Brooklyn performance space, with its fine acoustics and sterling keyboard, is an ideal spot to experience his artistry.—*Steve Futterman (Feb. 26.)*

Marta Sanchez
Bar Bayeux

The composer and bandleader Marta Sanchez's signature ensemble sound aligns two saxophones with her own piano and an alert rhythm team. Here, as on her celebrated album "El Rayo de Luz," from last year, Sanchez takes full advantage of the interpretive and improvisational powers of the tenor saxophonist Chris Cheek, an acclaimed player in his own right.—*S.F. (Feb. 26.)*

Tibet House U.S. Benefit
Carnegie Hall

Every winter, New York raises the flag for a region known for serenity (Tibet) at a venue synonymous with classical music (Carnegie Hall) with a concert dominated by blistering rock and roll. This year's Tibet House Benefit is particularly rich with monumental figures, including Patti Smith, Bettye LaVette, Laurie Anderson, and the organization's artistic director, Philip Glass. But, if the past is any indication, all eyes will fixate on the singular bolt of lightning that appears here in human form: a shirtless senior citizen known to earthlings as Iggy Pop.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Feb. 26.)*

Khai Dreams
Baby's All Right

Khai Dreams, an indie singer-songwriter from Los Angeles, has quietly built a following by crafting songs as earnest and heartfelt as homemade valentines. His D.I.Y. approach blends touches of R. & B. and surf guitar, but the production is sparse enough to emphasize his youthful voice and the simplicity of his lyricism. On songs such as "Sunkissed," an acoustic ditty that's become a favorite on TikTok, he sings with enough sincerity to make lines like "It's so lovely loving you" sound sweet rather than ham-handed.—*Julyssa Lopez (Feb. 27.)*

Celine Dion
Barclays Center

Last November, Celine Dion released "Courage," the twenty-seventh album of her four-decade career. Though the record proves her longevity and her fixed position as one of the great power balladeers of her generation, it also marks new beginnings: the songs, written after the death of her husband, are more upbeat, dance-oriented collaborations with contemporary artists such as Sia, Lauv, and Sam Smith. The album also led to her first U.S. tour in a decade, but her sixteen-year-long Vegas residency has kept her voice in top shape.—*J.L. (Feb. 28-29.)*

Marshall Jefferson
House of Yes

Aside from the late Frankie Knuckles, Marshall Jefferson was the producer most responsible for the sound and shape of late-eighties Chicago house music. His string of classics can still set a party off like little else, and when Jefferson d.j.s he offers a goodly helping of his own catalogue, as he should.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Feb. 29.)*

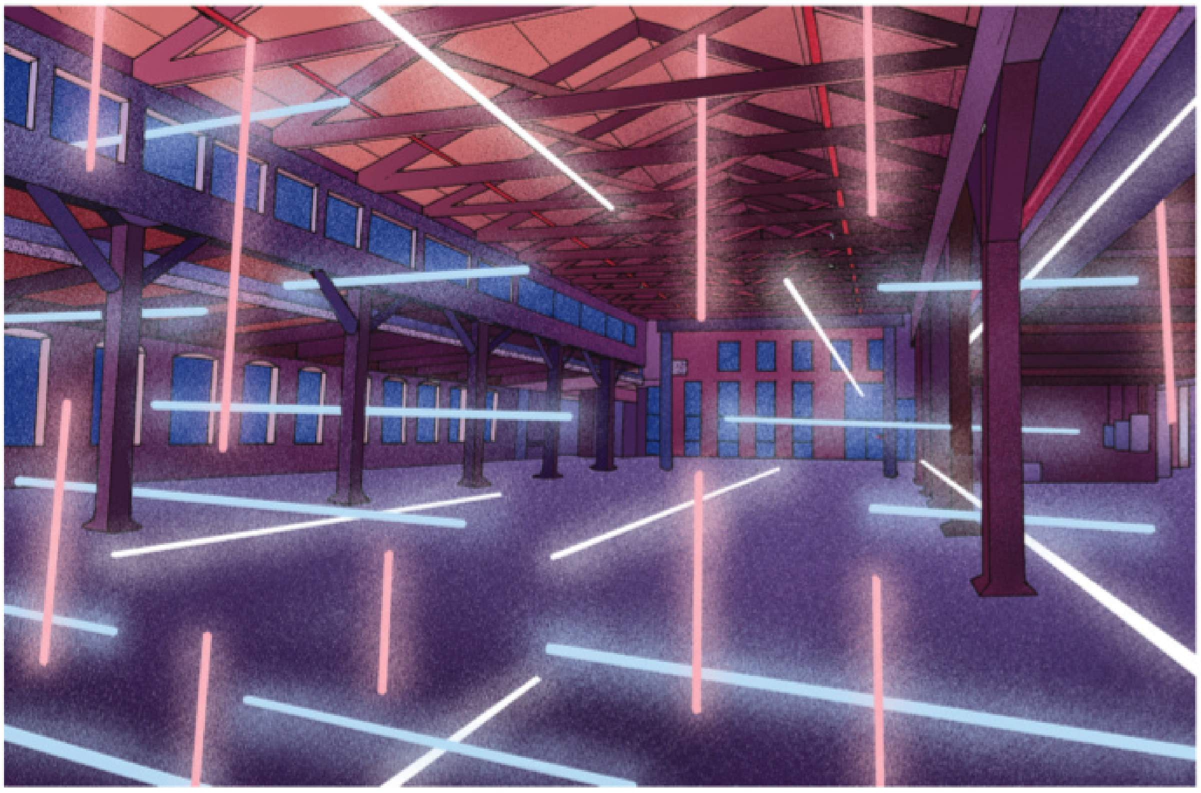
Schwarzmann
Avant Gardner

The second edition of Cityfox Live—all real-time performances, no d.j.'ing—features a robust bill that includes the Chicago native Kate Simko, who specializes in lush orchestration, and the Brazilian techno-minimalist Gui Boratto. Most enticing, though, is Schwarzmann (the German techno producer-d.j.s Frank Wiedemann and Henrik Schwarz), accompanied by the supple Chicago house singer-songwriter Robert Owens. Their performances as a trio have a charming hominess that fits Owens's soulful catalogue to a T.—*M.M. (Feb. 29.)*

iyla
Rough Trade NYC

The singer iyla—whose whimsical video for her single "Juice" went viral last year, springboarding her to an eager audience—is both a visual- and a vocal-oriented artist. The stunning qualities of her voice, suffused with soul and pop sensibilities in equal measure, are only enhanced by her music videos, which traffic in playful eccentricities as much as they do markers of high art; each frame is a portrait as each note commands its own space.—*Briana Younger (March 2.)*

AVANT-POP



Like any self-respecting young arts space, Knockdown Center is carved from the shell of a former factory. By now, it's probably best to ignore the political implications of aesthetes revelling where their ancestors once made doorframes and simply enjoy this cavernous, ravishing Goliath in Maspeth, Queens. On Feb. 29, Knockdown inaugurates **"Outline: Winter,"** a shrewdly programmed showcase that prizes novel sounds over boldface names. The headliners, John Maus and Boy Harsher, plus the band Patience, foreground a brooding undercurrent of eighties synth pop. Bleaker still is Katie Gately, whose every note suggests the score to a particularly harrowing contemporary-dance recital. On her heart-stopping new album, "Loom," Gately navigates the death of her mother, crooning over distorted samples of animal howls, earthquakes, and a closing coffin. It's haunted music seemingly tailor-made to echo through a ghostly old factory.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

ILLUSTRATION BY EMMA ROULETTE

MOVIES

Birds of Prey

Cathy Yan's film is a spinoff of "Suicide Squad" (2016). That was not a tale, you'd think, from which much was asking to be spun, but Margot Robbie, undaunted, reprises her role as Harley Quinn. Still, the character boasts a well-defined look—pigtails, hot pants, and tattoos—and a backstory to reckon with: she trained as a psychiatrist before sashaying over to the dark side. She and the Joker were the power couple of Gotham, but that relationship has now ended, and a grieving Harley takes out her wrath on anyone who crosses her path, notably a crime lord known as Black Mask (Ewan McGregor). She also joins up with other female fighters (played by Ella Jay Basco, Jurnee Smollett-Bell, Rosie Perez, and Mary Elizabeth Winstead), yet the sense of team spirit is fitful at best, and the movie sputters out in manic violence and a flurry of onscreen graphics.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 2/17 & 24/20.) (In wide release.)*

La Captive

Chantal Akerman's tale of erotic obsession and artistic sublimation, from 2000—an adaptation of Proust's "La Prisonnière"—stars Stanislas Merhar as Simon, a rich and effete young Parisian intellectual, whose live-in lover, Ariane (Sylvie Testud), is in love with another woman (Olivia Bonamy). Updating the action to contemporary Paris, Akerman infuses modernity—with its remote controls, cordless phones, and sleek cars—with anachronistic luxuries, styles, and, above all, manners. The actors' chilled voices and frozen gestures evoke an age of intimate decorum that's broken solely by sexual abandon (depicted with a disturbing blend of delicacy and crudeness). Finding rhapsodic melodrama in high art, Akerman pulls Mozart out of the opera house and into the bedroom with an arch a-cappella duet for separated lovers. She places her exemplary young actors—limpid and agitated, relaxed yet precise—in majestic tableaux of sumptuous settings and colors that resonate with the roiling mysteries and voluptuous overtones of films by Alfred Hitchcock. In French.—*Richard Brody (French Institute Alliance Française, March 3, and streaming.)*

Corpus Christi

Daniel (Bartosz Bielenia), a young convict, is released from a juvenile-detention center and, instead of taking on a job that was set up for him, walks to a nearby parish, in rural Poland, and pretends to be a priest named Father Tomasz. So successful is the deceit that his congregation grows, and he assuages some of the bitter feelings that have eroded the community. One of the many ironies that sustain Jan Komasa's fine movie, which was nominated for Best International Feature Film at this year's Academy Awards, is that Daniel is more of a believer than a fraudster. If we, in turn, believe in the effect that he has on the faithful, that's largely because of the charismatic Bielenia, whose intensity—like the glare of his blue-green eyes—rarely falters. He is ably supported by Aleksandra Konieczna, as a sexton who suspects the truth. In Polish.—*A.L. (2/17 & 24/20) (In limited release.)*

Downhill

Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Will Ferrell star in this remake of the 2014 Swedish drama "Force Majeure," which is itself a twist on Ernest Hemingway's story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," a tale of a marriage instantly soured when the husband displays cowardice. Here, the Stantons—Billie (Louis-Dreyfus), Pete (Ferrell), and their two young sons—arrive at a resort in the Austrian Alps for a ski vacation; when a controlled avalanche appears to threaten the family, Pete, rather than face the danger alongside his wife and children, bolts, then denies having done so. The film's directors, Nat Faxon and Jim Rash, who wrote the script with Jesse Armstrong, split the original movie's sardonic tone into separate strands of over-the-top comedy and harsh melodrama. The latter schema is promising, but the movie doesn't follow through on it; family life is rendered so clichéd that the story offers nothing but mechanical plot points, and the poorly defined characters have no identities beyond the actors' personalities.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

Premature

The director Rashaad Ernesto Green's poignant coming-of-age drama reflects his fruitful collaboration with Zora Howard, who wrote the script with him and also stars as Ayanna, a high-school senior in Harlem who is preparing to leave for college. But Ayanna's plans change when she begins a relationship with an earnest and determined musician named Isaiah (Joshua Boone) and becomes pregnant. Though their romance is at the movie's center, the drama rests on a solidly constructed foundation of friendship—Ayanna's bonds with her three best friends (played by Imani Lewis, Tashiana Washington, and Alexis Marie Wint). The young women's deep-rooted, no-holds-barred rapport comes to life in dialogue of brash vitality and passionate understanding; the actors, aided by Green's attentive direction, realize these scenes with energy and nuance that the overarching plot often omits. The merely illustrative approach to the main drama undercuts the lived-in specificity of this fine-grained background. Michelle Wilson brings strength and vulnerability to her too few scenes as Ayanna's mother.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

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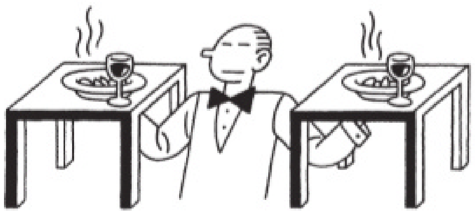
IN REVIVAL

COURTESY METROGRAPH PICTURES AND WAKA FILMS

An extraordinary twelve-year-old actor, Lissa Baléra, stars in the Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambety's final film, **"The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun,"** from 1999. (It screens in MOMA's series "It's All in Me: Black Heroines," on Feb. 29.) Baléra plays Sili Laam, a girl from a shantytown outside Dakar who, despite a disability that requires her to use crutches, travels to the city to make a living for herself and her blind grandmother. Sili becomes an itinerant newspaper vender (the only female one there) and is so successful that she incurs the resentment—and the violence—of her young male competitors, whom she faces down with courage and resilience. Mambety's richly textured view of urban life fuses fiction and documentary, displaying the rampant poverty and endemic misogyny in the modernizing capital. With fable-like lyricism, he contrasts the bitter competition among the poor with exemplary acts of audacious solidarity—and shows the vital public culture that arises spontaneously from the struggles of street people.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Le Crocodile

80 Wythe St., Brooklyn

The answer to the question of what you should order at Le Crocodile, a new French restaurant in Williamsburg, is hiding in plain sight. On the postcard that comes with your check and on the books of matches and toothpicks by the host stand, a series of charmingly naïf illustrations depict a chicken, standing alone or disappearing into the toothy, gaping jaw of a somewhat gleeful-looking reptile. At Le Crocodile, you are the crocodile—get ready to toss *le poulet* lustily down your gullet. Half of a roasted one comes dripping with jus and sprinkled with chopped parsley, its crisp skin the same shade of golden as the bistro-style French fries piled high beside it.

It's a thrillingly enormous portion of food, befitting this thrillingly enormous sort of restaurant, which took the place of Andrew Tarlow's Reynard at the Wythe Hotel. The poulet frites is not instead of steak frites, it's in addition to it—and Le Crocodile's steak frites is not just plain old steak frites, it's steak frites au poivre, meaning that the meat is encrusted in cracked peppercorn and finished with a velvety spoonful of pan sauce. The menu offers four varieties of pâté, plus a duck-and-rabbit rillette. There are leeks vinaigrette *and* leek gratin, pot-au-feu *and* cassoulet. There are six varieties of gin-and-tonic, and no fewer than twelve desserts: profiteroles and madeleines, flourless chocolate cake and chocolate pot de crème, tarte au citron and tarte tatin.

The chefs, Aidan O'Neal and Jake Leiber, mastered the art of the neighborhood restaurant with Chez Ma Tante, the French-ish place they opened in Greenpoint in 2017. At the Wythe, their ambition is bolder—Williamsburg has become an extension of Manhattan, the hotel's swanky vibe would have you believe, and they can make it here, too. Le Crocodile is Brooklyn's answer to Balthazar; with just a few smart design tweaks (higher wainscoting, built-in booths, velvet chairs), the dining room has been transformed from rustic wedding venue to glamorous brasserie.

As at Balthazar, the menu's breadth of fine-tuned favorites gives it an edge over French restaurants with smaller menus that tend toward the novel or the esoteric. At Bar Bête, which opened in December, in Carroll Gardens, a mid-course omelette filled with peekytoe crabmeat, topped with togarashi, and served with seaweed butter overpromised and underdelivered; at Le Crocodile, a much simpler, technically perfect omelette, served with greens and lightly pickled chanterelles, held its own among the murderers' row of *plats principaux*.

This is not to say that Le Crocodile resists risk or trends entirely. One of the four pâtés is meatless, made with shiitake, maitake, and cremini mushrooms and achieves a remarkably convincing I-can't-believe-it's-not-liver texture. A pork chop is served with kale, anchovies, and a slice of burrata (which was described by a server as "a palate cleanser"); a gloriously fatty duck breast is strewn with sticky-sweet kumquats. You'll find cacio-e-pepe orzo, and a crab salad with the spicy Japanese condiment yuzu kosho.

But what's most exciting about Le Crocodile is that its young and energetic chefs seem focussed mainly on perfecting—and occasionally gently revising—an encyclopedia of classics. A plate of de-shelled escargot and thinly sliced fennel in a broth fragrant with Pernod was powerfully transportive. A French 75 made with Cognac left me wondering what I had against the stuff—it had seemed suited only for a snifter in a smoke-filled library or, worse, a trashy night club, but suddenly struck me as elegant and refreshing.

One evening, two women at the next table enjoyed separate orders of the roast chicken. At a moment in restaurant culture when "everything is meant to be shared" is practically a mandate, this seemed like a radical, liberating move, and one that a menu like this encourages. Even with a large party, you couldn't possibly try everything in one visit, so you might as well order just exactly what you feel like. Share in pleasure, if not plates, then come back for more. *(Dishes $9-$91.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

PHOTOGRAPH BY COLE WILSON FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THE CYNICISM VOTE

Early in last week's Democratic Presidential debate, in Las Vegas, just before it began to seem as if Michael Bloomberg's cutman might rush onto the stage during a commercial break, carrying a spit bucket and an ice pack, the former mayor of New York made an observation about the candidates. "If we took off this panel everybody that was wrong on criminal justice sometime in their careers," he said, "there'd be nobody else up here."

He was almost right. A crude way of summarizing the remaining viable contenders in the Democratic field is to note that voters have a choice of: a former mayor who championed stop-and-frisk practices that targeted African-American and Latino men; another former mayor, who fired a black police chief after he recorded phone calls in which senior white officers made racist comments; a former prosecutor who may have helped send a wrongfully accused black teen-ager to prison; a former Vice-President who co-wrote the 1994 crime bill; a democratic socialist who voted for and defended that bill; or Senator Elizabeth Warren, who has held office only since 2013, and has no comparable stain on her record. Individual politicians often face liabilities with particular segments of the electorate. It's unusual, though, for so many in one field to be susceptible on such a similar theme; a now entirely white Democratic slate is being asked to explain past positions on criminal-justice issues, and, specifically, the effects of those positions on people of color.

How did the Democrats end up here? Part of the problem dates to the 1994 crime bill, which Joe Biden spearheaded, as the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and President Bill Clinton signed into law. The bill was a response to alarming rates of violent crime—and to Republicans' accusations that Democrats were soft on the issue. It included an assault-weapons ban and the Violence Against Women Act, but it also imposed harsh federal sentences and mandatory "three strikes" rules. Even so, no one in the Democratic leadership then could have predicted that criminal-justice reform would factor quite as it has in current politics. Hillary Clinton held public office from 2001 to 2013, but it wasn't until 2016 that she was called out for a remark she had made in 1996, about "superpredators," saying that "we have to bring them to heel." Before this election, Biden was rarely challenged on his role in the crime bill. The problem isn't just the bill but the cultural devastation of mass incarceration that it seemed to engender, and that cloud has hung over the Party, creating vulnerabilities even for younger, more progressive, and nonwhite Democrats. Senator Kamala Harris's 2020 campaign was hounded by concerns regarding her years as a prosecutor, and Senator Cory Booker dropped out before questions were widely raised about oversight of the Newark Police Department during his tenure as mayor.

In an unimaginable irony—it seems that nearly all our current ironies were unimaginable not long ago—the situation has provided an opportunity for Donald Trump. The President frequently appears challenged by the English language, but he is fluent in cynicism. In 2016, he both proclaimed that he was the "law and order" candidate and asked African-Americans, "What do you have to lose?" In fact, almost a million fewer African-Americans voted that year than in 2012. Some portion of that drop reflected the fact that it was the first election in eight years without a black candidate at the top of the ticket; another part may be attributed to voter-suppression tactics. But it also stemmed from a perception that Hillary Clinton was no different, or at least no better, than Trump on matters of race—and that perception was driven by concerns about criminal justice. In 2016, Trump won just eight per cent of the black vote, but he got a surprising

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

thirteen per cent of the black male vote.

It is pedestrian, at this point, to note that there were differences between Trump and Clinton. Big ones. Trump's racial cynicism reached a zenith with his signing, in December, 2018, of the First Step Act, which sets out to redress the disparities of federal sentencing guidelines. But he is no reformer. He pushed his first Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, to crack down on low-level drug offenders. Sessions also instructed U.S. Attorneys to seek the death penalty in some drug cases, and halted programs that sought to reform chronically troubled police departments.

Nonetheless, Trump is courting the black vote. He regularly touts a record low unemployment rate among African-Americans (while declining to point out that it is sixty-seven per cent higher than the national average). In September, he told leaders from historically black colleges and universities that his commitment to them was "bigger and better and stronger than any Administration by far." In October, he hosted a photo-ready gathering of black conservatives at the White House. At this year's State of the Union address, he introduced people of color who were recipients of his beneficence—schoolchildren, veterans, a single mother—even as he slipped a Presidential Medal of Freedom to Rush Limbaugh. Most pointedly, his campaign aired an ad during the Super Bowl that featured Alice Marie Johnson, a black woman who had served twenty-two years of a life term for a nonviolent drug offense, before Trump commuted her sentence, at the behest of Kim Kardashian.

He still has a ways to go. Last month, the Washington *Post* reported that eighty-three per cent of African-Americans believe that Trump is a racist, and sixty-five per cent think that this is "a bad time" to be black in America. His strategy, though, seems designed to persuade black voters not so much that he is better than they thought but that the Democratic nominee will be worse. (Given the latest news reports, we can expect this reasoning to feature in Russian social-media disinformation campaigns, as it did in 2016.) The no-difference argument will still be false, regardless of who the Democrats' eventual nominee is, on every issue—criminal justice, health care, education, gun control, immigration, climate change—that disproportionately affects people of color. And no Democrat will ask Hollywood to bring back movies like the racist classic "Gone with the Wind," as Trump did at a rally last week.

It is undeniable that Trump stokes the fury of voters who support him; less recognized is his clear hope to induce despair in those who do not. The imperative for Democrats is to defeat not only Trump but also the cynicism that abides him. One calculation for his reëlection isn't how many African-Americans will vote for him. It's how many will be dissuaded from voting at all.

—Jelani Cobb

THE PICTURES
BUSYBODY

One recent afternoon, not long before the première of "Emma," the first feature film by Autumn de Wilde, the Los Angeles-based director and photographer visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York. De Wilde, who is six feet two, wore a plum-colored Borsalino fedora ("I was re-upping my hats, and Bill Nighy helped me"), a high-collared pink blouse, a dark A-line jacket, a mango Prada Galleria bag, navy trousers, pink socks, and black oxford shoes. She carried an elegant cane ("I have arthritis, and I decided not to hide it anymore") and resembled an amused Edwardian flâneur. "My style icons are two people: Oscar Wilde and Paddington Bear," she said.

She has a special memory of the Met: her five-year-old daughter, asleep—"She was like a long noodle"—on a bench in front of Jackson Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)," the billboard-size action painting from 1950. "She looked so amazing," de Wilde said. "People started gathering around to take pictures." Arrow de Wilde, now twenty, is the lead singer in a band called Starcrawler, and six feet three: a very long noodle. De Wilde later re-created the Pollock nap image in a photo shoot, with Elijah Wood wearing Rodarte pajamas.

"We only got in trouble when he tried to take his shoes off," she said.

"Emma," with a screenplay adapted from Jane Austen by the novelist Eleanor Catton, comes out at a particular moment, when a number of female directors and creators are reimagining classic girls' stories ("Little Women") and biographies ("Dickinson"), and playing up the boldness and independence of their heroines in ways that feel new. De Wilde's artful whimsy—evidenced in her short films for Prada, photographs for Rodarte, and album covers for Jenny Lewis, Beck, the White Stripes, Childish Gambino, and Elliott Smith, among others—makes Austen's familiar tale of youthful meddling in Regency England look pleasingly strange.

De Wilde likes to "tell stories with color," she said. The film opens in a hothouse bursting with orange and pink flowers; Mrs. Goddard's boarding-school girls move in a flock, à la "Madeline" or "The Handmaid's Tale," wearing red capes and pale bonnets; the pink-and-green décor of Hartfield, Emma's home, evokes a layer cake frosted with buttercream. "I wanted it to be like a pastry shop," de Wilde said. "I told all my departments, 'The colors need to feel edible.'" Amid these trappings, the humans themselves can look almost plain.

De Wilde headed toward the Met's classical sculptures. "In my fashion research for 'Emma,' I was fascinated by the change in women's fashion in the Regency period—from corseted hourglass hoopskirts to, basically, nightgowns," she said. "The aristocracy was raping Italy and Greece of their sculptures and bringing them back to England; it seems so obviously inspired by them." She charged past Pacific Island *bis* poles ("Incredible!") and continued, "For the first time, men could see the shape of a woman's body under her dress—the shape of her butt when the wind blew." She made a curved-rump gesture. In the sunlit atrium of the Greek and Roman Sculpture Court, de Wilde admired the ancient statues' Austenian features: Empire waists, tight ringlets, soft arms, muscled languor.

Austen's novel, whose heroine is not only handsome, clever, and rich but a spirited busybody, is, de Wilde said, "so much about Emma observing things inside her head"; Austen's appreciation of absurdity makes her fun to adapt. "Life is bizarre," de Wilde went on. She did a double take. "Like this." Behind her, two teen-age girls were messing with a cell phone near an armless statue. "She's taking a Boomerang of his broken penis," she said.

Forging on, de Wilde saw Austenian details everywhere. Passing an exhibition called "Making Marvels," loud with ticking and the whirring of gears, she was drawn to a clock that resembled a gold-leaf, steampunk R2-D2. "This is fucking incredible!" she said. A small boy looked up at her. "The sound of clocks is in every room in 'Emma,'" she went on. "Emma's life is orderly, beautiful, and ornate. But the clock's not working anymore, in her life."

De Wilde grew up in the arts: her father is the sixties-counterculture photographer Jerry de Wilde, and her mother, Mary, regularly took her to museums. As a kid, de Wilde was prone to "museum fatigue," she said, "because I didn't realize how over-observant my brain was. So I used to play this game where I would memorize color combinations that I liked: lavender, citrine, dark green, rose." She gestured at a nearby painting. "Would you remember that her headband was red? But that red is fucking amazing! Green is on the opposite end of the spectrum, and it's attractive to our eyes."

She pressed on to the European galleries. Gérôme's "Pygmalion and Galatea," circa 1890, was a "big inspiration," she said. "I have muses." She cited "Emma"'s stars. "Anya Taylor-Joy is a muse, Mia Goth is a muse, Johnny Flynn is a muse." She looked again. "Of course, this is a man, so he's making out with his muse." Passing an 1831 David d'Angers bust of a woman with her hair styled in egg-shaped buns, she said, "Mrs. Elton!," and took a picture. Male nudes brought to mind Merchant-Ivory's "A Room with a View," from 1985, which she had the "Emma" cast watch. "The pond scene"—frolicking, whooping, bouncing—"is a pivotal moment in my life," de Wilde said. "And it told so much about the freedom they desire—the men as well as the women." They also screened "Bringing Up Baby": "I like to show a rebellious woman by making everyone around her not rebellious."

As she said this, she was standing in front of Gustave Courbet's "Woman with a Parrot," from 1866—a female nude, splayed on a sheet in delicious repose, her wavy hair spread out, her hand extended in welcome to a vivid green bird. "This is how I felt this morning," de Wilde said, smiling. "This is my emoji for today."

—*Sarah Larson*

GOOD CASTING DEPT.

OLD DRUG

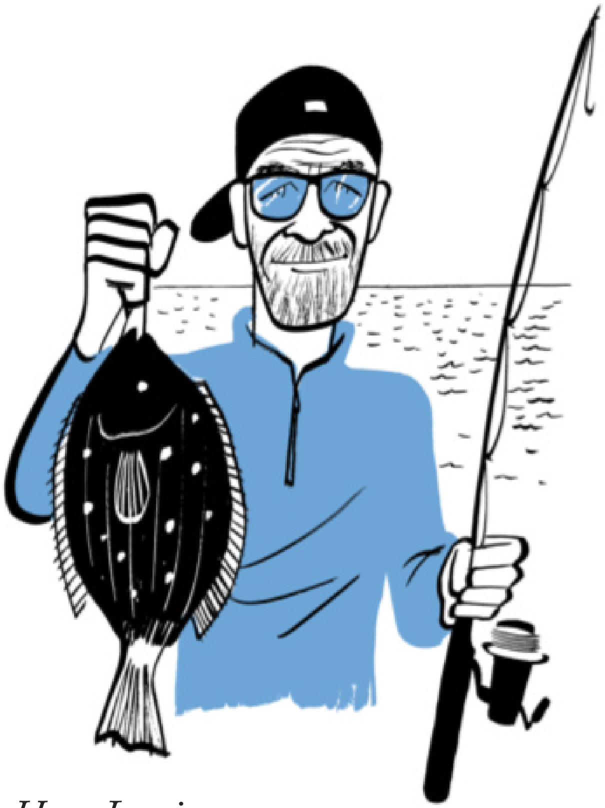
Midtown Manhattan, 5:30 A.M., Huey Lewis riding shotgun. Lewis may be many things—eighties hit machine, MTV eyeworm, entertainer for hire—but he's nothing if not a fisherman. So when he passed through town in October, ahead of the release of a new album (his first in ten years, and likely his last, because, since recording it, with his band, the News, he has basically, as a result of a rare disease, lost his hearing, and therefore his ability to sing in key), he wanted to try to slay some stripers. He'd never fished New York City. So he signed on with Captain Frank Crescitelli, of Fin Chaser Charters. Meetup was a Staten Island marina, at first light.

Lewis had some urban angling experience. "When I was a kid, I had a little El Toro," he said. "Like, an eight-foot sailboat. I lived in Strawberry Point, in Marin County. And I would sail around San Francisco Bay and take my spin rod along with a couple of Rapala lures and come back with three huge striped bass, no sweat."

The ear affliction, called Ménière's, comes and goes. Some weeks he's O.K., some days he can hardly hear the phone ring. This was, so far, at least before sunup, a good day. "But I can't book a show when I don't know if I'll be deaf."

Now sixty-nine, Lewis lives on a ranch in Montana, with several trout streams nearby. You wouldn't guess that he was born in New York City and spent his first years in Ohio. But he's mostly a Bay Area kid. His father, a radiologist, and his mother, an artist who escaped Poland in 1939, divorced soon after they got to California, in 1955. His mother's parents, who also fled Poland, had died by suicide together, in Lawrence, Massachusetts. "It was a 'House of Sand and Fog' thing," Lewis said. "And so my mother became a hippie, basically. She started hanging out at the No Name Bar in Sausalito, which was affiliated with Ferlinghetti, Lenny Bruce, and the City Lights crowd. She took up with a Beat poet named Lew Welch. That was my living room when I was a teen-ager. Gregory Corso and Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg sitting around drinking wine and smoking dope and reading poems." To get him clear of all this, Lewis's father sent him to boarding school in New Jersey. "I hated it," Lewis said. He bummed around Europe for a year, with a harmonica, then bailed on college, returned to the Bay, and, a dozen years and a bunch of bands later, emerged as a Reagan-era rock star. "It's hip to be square," he sang. And maybe it was.

In Great Kills Harbor, Captain Frank, a solidly built Staten Island lifer with a handlebar mustache and a lit cigar, was waiting aboard a spiffy outboard loaded with electronics. "What's the difference between a fishing guide and a large pizza?" he said. "The pizza can feed a family of four." The boat had a clear tank teeming with bunker—live bait—but



Huey Lewis

Lewis is a fly fisherman, and before long he was standing in the bow, casting a shrimplike pattern on a sinking line to some weakfish that Crescitelli had espied on his fish-finder. "I've never fished for fish on a screen before," Lewis said. He looked trim in fishing pants, a blue pullover, and black Allbirds. He kept his balance in the chop.

"There are more weakfishing world records within two miles of here than anywhere in the world," Crescitelli said.

"So let me get this straight—we got a chance at a world record?" Lewis said.

Not today. The weakfishing was weak, and Crescitelli gunned it out into the bay. Sun rising, Verrazzano towers gleaming. Crescitelli pulled up in a roiling stretch of water, which, he explained, was the outflow from a sewage-treatment plant a mile away. "Smell that sweet smell?" he said. "This is where the bait's at. Thing is, they changed the formula. It's not fishing as good as it used to."

"Fishing is never as good as it's going to be or as it was," Lewis said.

"There," Crescitelli said, pointing at his screen. "That's a shit ton of fish right there." Lewis cast and stripped, cast and stripped: nothing. Crescitelli steered north to Hoffmann Island, where sick immigrants were quarantined a century ago. "A guy made three porno movies here in the seventies. Used to be buildings there."

"Huh," Lewis said, pitching his line toward some old pilings: no dice.

"That's good casting, Huey. Don't be so hard on yourself."

To the south was another island, with a smokestack and some ruins. "This was the crematorium," Crescitelli said. He drifted the boat as close as he could, and Lewis worked the eddy line off the jetty. "Huey, you're right in the spot. C'mon, just one striper!"

Bang. Lewis's rod tip bent. A striper? No. A flounder. A flounder! On a fly?

"Never seen that, I gotta say," Crescitelli said.

"It's better than not fishing," Lewis said.

He held up the flounder, grinning, secure in the knowledge that a photo of him with such a meagre specimen would not in any way diminish his standing in the world.

—*Nick Paumgarten*

DAVID AND GOLIATH DEPT.
MAPMAKER

Jake Berman, a midtown lawyer, was recently examining the M.T.A. subway map on a wall of the West Fourth Street station, when an elderly tourist asked him how to get to Chelsea. Berman began to relay precise directions; then he stopped. "Funny story," he said. "I designed a subway map—a competitor that the M.T.A. wants to get rid of. So you're asking the right dude."

The funny story begins twelve years ago. Berman, a transplant from San Francisco, was at N.Y.U. Law School. One weekend, he had a date in Brooklyn. After consulting the subway map, he decided to take the B train from West Fourth. "Here I am, waiting like an idiot for half an hour, and there's no B," he recalled. "They didn't have countdown clocks. They didn't have cell-phone service. The whole thing ends up being a slightly dramatic fiasco."

Berman gave up on the date; he later learned that the B doesn't run on weekends, a detail that he couldn't find on the map. He got so angry that he designed his own map, spending hundreds of hours on it and joining the ranks of New York's amateur transit cartographers. He has since revised his map and designed some for other cities, and even for science-fiction epics. (He rendered all of "Star Wars" into a diagram.) "Frustration is a great way to become creative," he said. Two years ago, he discovered that, after he'd posted his New York subway map on Wikipedia, in 2009, someone had begun selling it on Etsy. He wrote in to complain. Then he stole the idea. He listed the map himself, at a starting price of fifty dollars.

Trying to explain the workings of a megacity's transit system with elegance and accuracy is about as easy as describing the city itself. Some poetry is required. To create the first color-coded subway map for New York, in 1967, transit officials brought in a former rocket scientist, who devised four prototypes; instead of choosing one of them, the officials mashed two together, resulting in a much hated composite. Then came Massimo Vignelli, an Italian designer who drafted a map that was crisp, beautiful, and easy to read, but defiantly indifferent to geography. The map is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, but the M.T.A. ditched it after seven years, considering it too abstract.

Today's official map emerged from the work of a committee, headed by John Tauranac, a writer in the transportation authority's marketing department who hated the Vignelli design and pursued one that correlated more closely with the actual city. That map, presented in 1979, was celebrated, but over the years it has been repeatedly tinkered with, and has evolved into a visual mess. Last summer, Tauranac petitioned the M.T.A. to hire him to revamp the design. When the agency ignored him, he went to the press, telling the *Post*, "It's incumbent on me as a map designer to say, 'Look, schmuck, you could do a better map, and I could do it for you.'" He added, "I wouldn't say 'schmuck.'"

Berman's map is suavely graphic, like Vignelli's, but it also adheres to the city's geography. He has earned a few thousand dollars selling it online. Last month, though, he got a notice from Etsy, saying that the M.T.A. had ordered the site to stop selling it. Berman got on the phone with an M.T.A. lawyer. "He alleged that I had ripped off the Weekender," Berman said, referring to an obscure online map that the M.T.A. issued in 2011. He told the M.T.A. that he had created his map years earlier, and that he would not comply with the agency's order.

Other amateur cartographers sympathized. Eddie Jabbour, the creator of the KickMap, a subway app, told Berman that the M.T.A. had hassled him, too. Even Tauranac, who for decades has been drafting unofficial subway maps, said he was once ordered to desist. "It's like déjà vu all over again," he said.

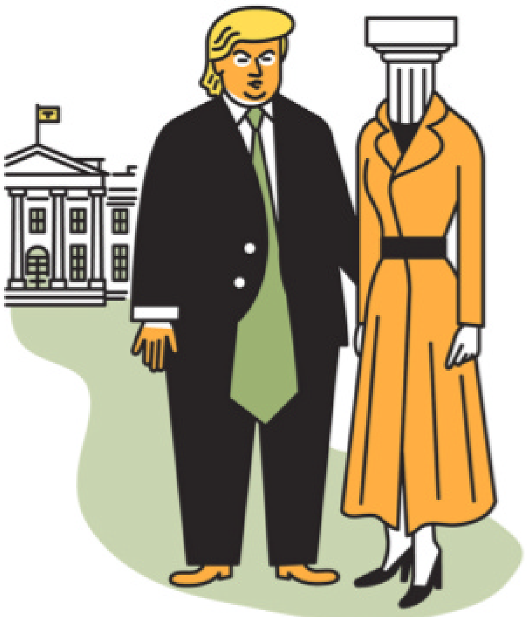
"It's a very trivial thing to start trouble over," Berman said. The M.T.A. apparently reached the same conclusion. The agency declined to comment on the Etsy situation, but shortly afterward it withdrew its legal demand. Berman celebrated with a bottle of brandy. "There's nothing more New York-y than this," he said. "Everyone sends lots of threats, stomps their feet, but in the end we come to an agreement."

—*Raffi Khatchadourian*

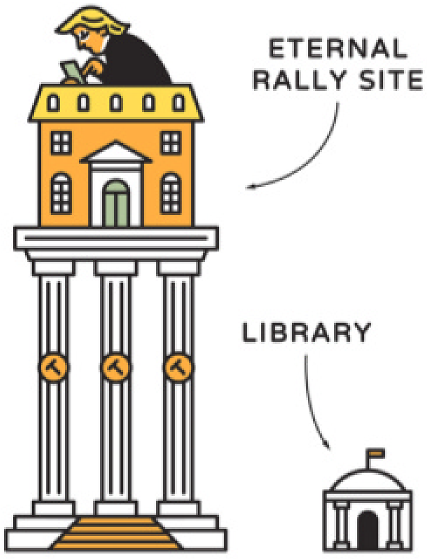
SKETCHPAD

TRUMP'S NEO-NEOCLASSICISM

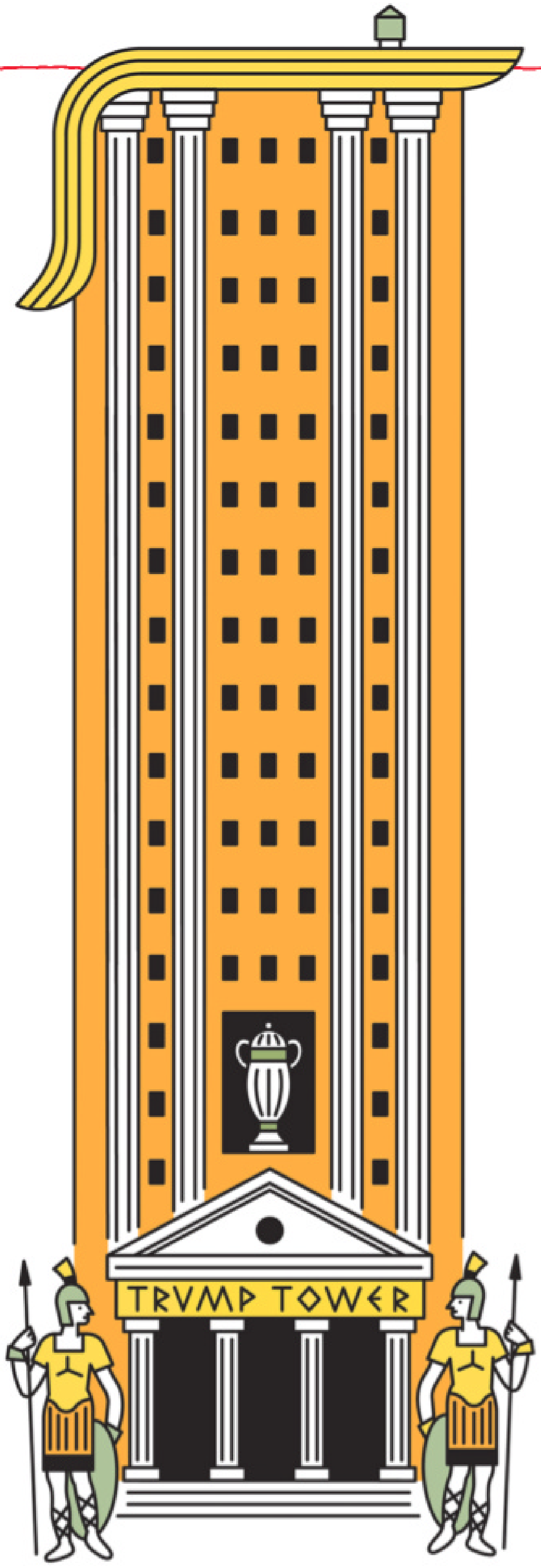
Last month, the Trump Administration drafted an executive order decreeing that new federal buildings be designed in the neoclassical style shared by beloved landmarks ranging from the White House and the Lincoln Memorial to Graceland. Given how the President always demands ideological consistency between his public and private lives—his refusal to hire undocumented workers at Trump Organization properties; his insistence that all Trump-branded products be made in America and never in China or Bangladesh; his devotion to the Christian morals espoused by his evangelical base—we will surely see his most prized business properties get their own makeovers very soon. —*Bruce Handy*



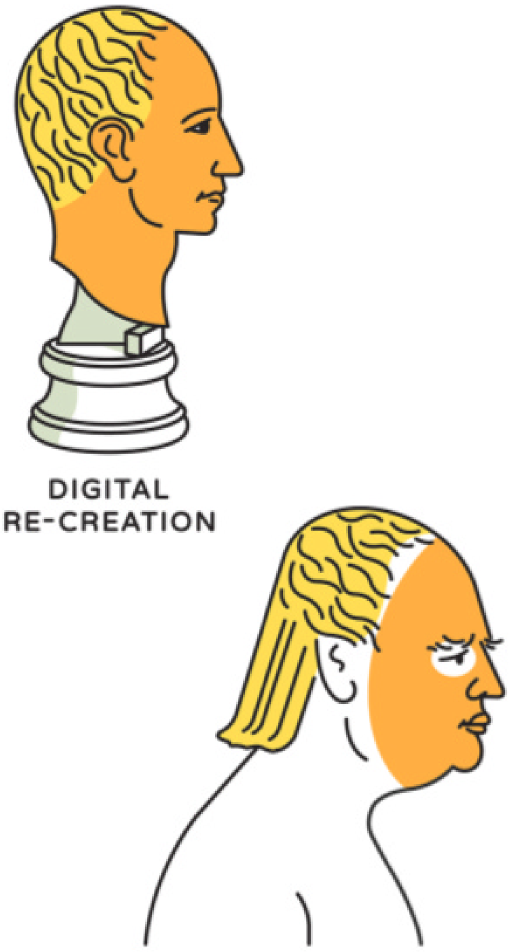
The stoic First Lady gets a stylish Doric makeover.



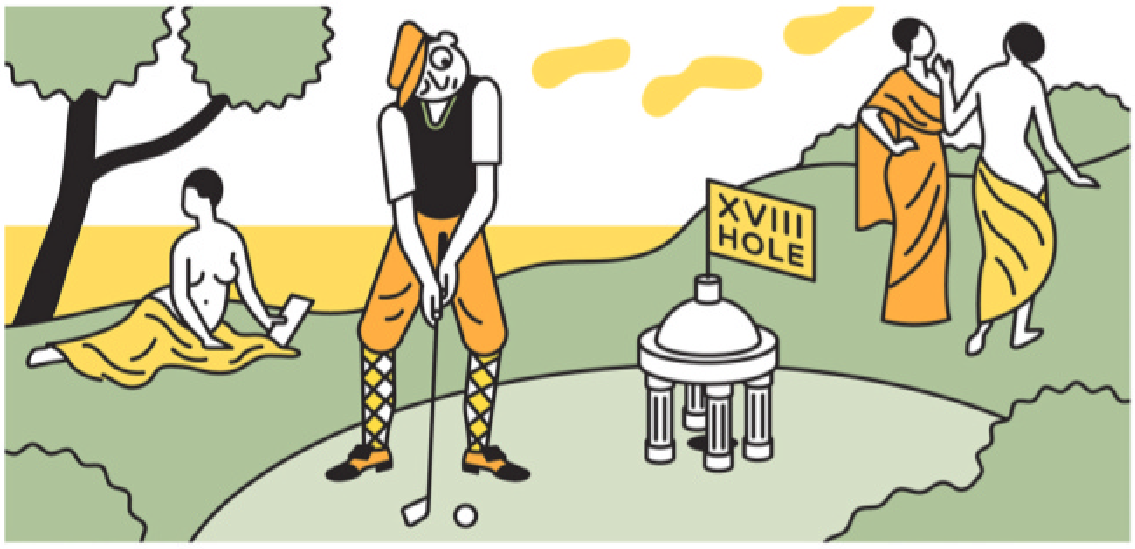
The future Trump Library and Eternal Rally Site Complex (formerly the Trump Doral).



The glamorous eighties modernism of Trump Tower in Manhattan is transformed by the equally glamorous neoclassical mode favored in Las Vegas.



Cutting-edge scholarship has revealed that ancient statuary was originally painted in colors that, though gaudy to modern eyes, were intended to have a lifelike effect. In this way, the President has long been a living proponent of the neoclassical style. A new imperial haircut is the perfect finishing touch!



The new XVIIIth hole at Trump National Golf Club and Sacred Grove, in Bedminster, New Jersey.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GREG CLARKE

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

BURDEN OF PROOF

Was a pair of 1987 murder convictions based on false testimony?

BY JENNIFER GONNERMAN

Eric Smokes and David Warren, sentenced as teens, insist that they are innocent.

There were nearly seventeen hundred murders in New York City in 1987. One of the first occurred about ten minutes after the ball dropped in Times Square, when a group of young people mugged a seventy-one-year-old French tourist named Jean Casse, on West Fifty-second Street, outside Ben Benson's Steak House. One young man punched the victim, and one or more rifled through his pockets. Casse fell, hitting his head on the sidewalk. He died ten hours later, at a hospital.

The New York City Police Department quickly set up a hotline and announced that it "desperately" needed "witnesses of the incident to come forward." Officers were instructed to ask anyone arrested for robbery if he had information about the murder. On the afternoon of January 2nd, the police caught four young people mugging a man on West Forty-seventh Street. The group included James Walker, a sixteen-year-old from Brooklyn. While in police custody, Walker told a detective that earlier that day he had run into an acquaintance named "Smokey," who had said that he'd "caught a body" in Manhattan on New Year's Eve.

Walker went on to identify Eric Smokes and David Warren, two best friends who lived in one of Brooklyn's poorest neighborhoods, East New York. Smokes was nineteen, and Warren was sixteen. They'd each had a minor run-in with the law: Smokes had been arrested and fined for shoplifting, and Warren had been arrested for a mugging. (Warren's case was later dismissed.)

On January 3rd, Smokes and Warren were questioned separately by detectives, and both said that they had gone to Times Square with friends on New Year's Eve; a few hundred thousand people had packed the streets. Smokes and Warren had ended up on West Forty-eighth Street, outside the Latin Quarter, a night club popular with teen-agers. Warren recalled, "We didn't have the funds for that, so we stood around for a little while" before heading south. Smokes said that, around West Thirty-eighth Street, he "saw some people fighting and saw some guy that got shot." When the bullet hit, feathers flew out of the man's jacket. Both Smokes and Warren said repeatedly that they had not gone north of Forty-eighth Street. According to the police report of Smokes's interrogation, "Mr. Smokes states he did not see any old man get mugged."

The police released Smokes and Warren, but arrested them five days later. Smokes watched from the back seat of a police cruiser as detectives brought his friend out of high school in handcuffs. "From the point that we got to his school, the reality of it really hit," Smokes told me. "He looked at me as a big brother, and I looked at him as my little brother, and there was nothing I could do to help my little brother." He added, "I couldn't comfort him in no way except to say that we're in this together."

They were sent to Rikers Island, where they were placed in separate housing units. "They took me from high school to jail," Warren told me. "It was like a dream that I just couldn't wake up from." Six months passed, and prosecutors offered Warren various plea deals: if he testified against Smokes, he would receive a very short prison sentence. Warren refused. He explained, "I'm not going to say he did something I know he didn't do."

That summer, Smokes and Warren were tried for murder in New York State Supreme Court, in Manhattan. Prosecutors accused Smokes of punching Jean Casse and Warren of trying to rob him. The prosecution's star witness was James Walker, who had signed a coöperation agreement with the Manhattan D.A.'s office; prosecutors promised that if he

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIRANDA BARNES

testified "truthfully" they would not send him to prison for the January 2nd mugging. Walker testified that he had committed robberies with Smokes and Warren in the past, and repeated his claim that Smokes had told him that he had "caught a body." Smokes and Warren insisted that these claims were untrue. But prosecutors also relied on four other young men, who claimed that they had seen Smokes and Warren at the crime scene. Smokes knew one of them, but the others, he said, were strangers.

The daily papers had covered the Casse murder, which may have exacerbated tensions in the courtroom. The jury, before delivering its verdict, sent a message to the judge, saying, "We would like the Court to know that we did not come to a decision lightly but with great emotional turmoil." They voted to convict both teen-agers of second-degree murder. After the trial ended, Warren, in a state of disbelief, remained in his seat. "I had to tap him and say, 'Come on,'" Smokes told me. "It didn't register that he was found guilty."

The judge, Clifford A. Scott, was known as one of the toughest judges in the city, and had embraced the nickname Maximum Scott. He sentenced Smokes to twenty-five years to life in prison and Warren to fifteen to life. At their sentencing hearing, Smokes declared, "I have been framed!"

In 2005, when Eric Smokes had been in prison in upstate New York for eighteen years, he received a letter from James Walker. When Smokes saw the name on the envelope, he said, he thought "it might be a pipe bomb or something." But the letter was an apology. "I was basically giving the police & DA what they wanted after I heard what they was looking for," Walker wrote. He added that he had been "strung out on crack" and "not thinking straight." Smokes, with assistance from a friend in prison, drafted a memo on his case and sent it, with copies of Walker's letter, to every lawyer and legal clinic he thought could help. Two years after Smokes had been sent to prison, the Manhattan D.A.'s office had charged five teen-agers in connection with the rape of a jogger in Central Park; in 2002, they were exonerated after a serial rapist confessed to the crime. Smokes's memo stated, "Like the suspects in the Central Park Case, David and Eric's arrest resulted from police investigation conducted under public and political pressure to hold someone responsible." No lawyer agreed to take his case.

In 2007, Warren returned to Brooklyn. Four years later, Smokes was released. "When I came home, I said, 'I got to do something,'" he told me. "I can't stand by idly and just accept the fact that I did twenty-five years for a crime I didn't do." He eventually found two attorneys, Craig Phemister and James Henning, who were willing to take on the case pro bono. The lawyers tracked down Walker and other people who had spoken to the police during the 1987 investigation, including Kevin Burns and Robert Anthony, two of the men who said they'd been at the crime scene. Burns, Anthony, and Walker all signed affidavits saying that they had given false testimony under pressure from law enforcement.

In February, 2017, Phemister and Henning met with prosecutors in the Conviction Integrity Program of the Manhattan D.A.'s office. The District Attorney, Cyrus Vance, Jr., had established the program, in 2010, to prevent wrongful convictions and to investigate claims of innocence. Henning, a recent law-school graduate, explained why he believed his clients had been wrongly convicted. The prosecutors from the Conviction Integrity Program, he later recalled, seemed "guarded and defensive." One of them had sent him a police report that he'd requested, but when he asked for other documents the prosecutors refused to share them. "The fact that they didn't want to give me anything, but they wanted everything from me, it put up red flags for me," Henning said.

Henning reviewed the Conviction Integrity Program's record: it had moved to vacate few convictions. He also learned that one of the two prosecutors who had worked to convict Smokes and Warren was still in the D.A.'s office. In order to share evidence with prosecutors, Henning needed to have a high level of trust in them. If Vance's Conviction Integrity Program reinvestigated the case and ultimately decided not to vacate Smokes's and Warren's convictions, Henning wrote in a letter to the office, "we will be forced to resort to litigation after having provided your office with all of our evidence ahead of time." Henning decided that his clients would be better off seeking justice in the courts.

In the summer of 2017, Henning filed a motion in New York State Supreme Court, asking a judge to hold a hearing on the evidence. The D.A.'s office consented to this. In a recent statement, Vance's office said, "We gave careful consideration to these renewed claims of innocence when they were presented to us several years ago. After further review, we determined these claims needed to be evaluated by a Judge." (Vance and others from his office declined to be interviewed for this story.)

In the hearing, Smokes and Warren would be presumed guilty until proven innocent; the onus would be on them to prove the assertions laid out in their motion. Persuading a judge to vacate a murder conviction is extraordinarily difficult, and for Smokes and Warren it promised to be especially challenging. There was no DNA evidence, and James Walker would not be able to testify on their behalf—not long after Henning had filed his motion, Walker died, of gunshot wounds. In the course of the following year, Smokes and Warren's hearing turned into a contentious battle that at times seemed to put the criminal-justice system itself on trial, revealing disturbing tactics employed by law enforcement during New York City's high-crime years, and also highlighting the perils of asking the Manhattan D.A.'s office to investigate itself.

On the morning of November 14, 2018, Smokes and Warren walked into the courthouse at 111 Centre Street, in Manhattan. Smokes was fifty-one years old, and Warren was forty-eight. Both men were heavyset, with tired eyes; Smokes, who had knee and hip problems, walked with a limp. Despite many years in separate prisons, the two had remained close friends, trading letters each month. Smokes said, of their shared predicament, "It's a marriage for us—it's a hell of a bond." Since coming home, Smokes had worked in construction, and Warren did asbestos removal. Both were married to the women they had been dating at the time of their arrests.

Around ten o'clock, Judge Stephen Antignani entered the courtroom and zipped up his black robe. Smokes and Warren sat with their lawyers. Henning was clean-shaven, with short hair and a crisp suit. Phemister had left the case, but Pierre Sussman—a veteran attorney who had helped overturn six murder convictions in the past six years—had taken his place. Christine Keenan, a longtime prosecutor in the Manhattan D.A.'s office, sat at a table by herself, her straight brown hair hanging partway down her back. The jury box was empty. Judge Antignani, a former prosecutor, would decide alone whether the convictions should stand. Smokes and Warren were about to live out the fantasy of anyone who has imagined challenging a conviction after being incarcerated. The people who had sent them to prison would now have to endure their own cross-examinations.

For thirty years, Smokes had been trying to figure out why three teen-agers he didn't know had testified against him. On the first day of the hearing, Henning called one of them, Robert Anthony, to the witness stand. Henning asked Anthony to state his age (forty-nine), his last year of schooling (ninth grade), and his job (truck driver), and then interrogated him about his role in the case. At first, Anthony's answers were brief, but then he seemed to become ready to unburden himself. Anthony said that on New Year's Eve, 1986, he had gone to Manhattan with about ten friends, including two of his cousins. On West Fifty-second Street, he saw an "old man lying on the ground" and heard "people yelling." He and a cousin later saw a news report about the incident and talked about having been at the scene. Anthony's mother overheard them and called the police.

The police questioned Anthony, he said, for around fourteen hours: "They kept asking me did I know who did it. I kept telling them no." He recalled that he said no "about fifty or sixty" times. "They didn't believe it or whatever. I don't know. They just was stuck on one track."

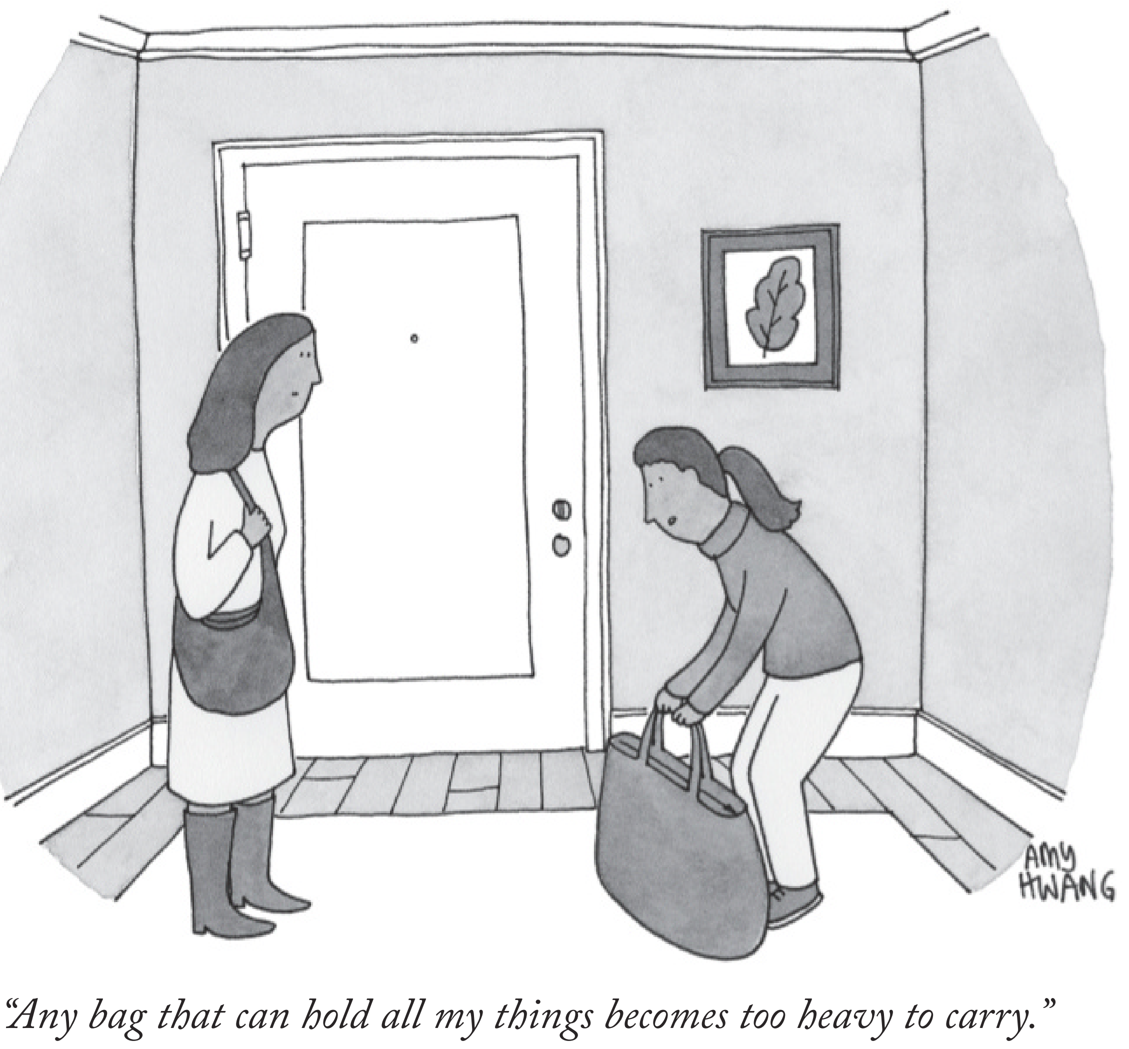
Anthony said that a detective had shown him photographs of Smokes and Warren: "He basically said, 'Those were the guys that did it.'" He also claimed that police had pressured him to coöperate, threatening to turn him into a suspect. "They said, 'How about this: You did it.' I said, 'I didn't do anything.' They said, 'Yes, well'—basically, in so many words, 'If they didn't do it, you did it.'" Anthony identified Smokes and Warren in a police lineup. In the hearing, he testified that those identifications had been a lie.

Anthony said that he had not wanted to testify at the murder trial: "I didn't want to ruin someone's life over something they didn't do." But the police had arrested him as a material witness. He spent the night in the Bronx House of Detention, then was taken straight to the courthouse. Henning asked him why he had lied on the witness stand. Anthony shook his head. "I mean, basically, I am sixteen years old," he said. "Scared." He added that, "because of this," he no longer had a relationship with his mother. "She messed up these guys' life. My life."

The next person to testify was Kevin Burns, who had known Smokes since they were young. Two weeks after the murder, Burns recalled, police officers arrested him on an unrelated charge. While he was in police custody, he saw that officers had a newspaper with a story about Smokes's and Warren's arrests. Burns blurted out that he had been on the block when the murder occurred and had information about it. He later explained, "I thought it could probably help my case." In the month before the trial, Burns gave prosecutors two different versions of the crime. Nevertheless, they put him on the stand, and he pinned it on Smokes and Warren.

At the hearing, Burns, who was now fifty-one and had worked at the Department of Sanitation, testified that he had not even been in Manhattan that night. "I didn't know it was a crime to lie under oath. I was seventeen, eighteen years old," he said. "I was doing what I was expected to do by the D.A." He explained that he had hated Smokes when they were teen-agers, and that he had once mistakenly shot him with a pellet gun. When asked why he had decided to testify at the hearing, Burns became emotional. "Everybody has something in their life they are ashamed of doing," he said. "This is my lie that I get to rectify from thirty years ago."

Smokes and Warren never brought their wives to court, wanting to shield them from the stress of the hearing. When the police had gone looking for Smokes, on January 3, 1987, they'd found him walking with his girlfriend, Tammie Jenkins, in East New York. Two officers jumped out of an unmarked van, Jenkins later testified, and "one pointed the gun to his head, and the other one had it at his back." Warren lived in the Pink Houses, a public-housing project, in the same building as his girlfriend, Kim Williams. When the police showed up there, later that night, he was in her apartment.



"Any bag that can hold all my things becomes too heavy to carry."

The couples separated after Smokes and Warren went to prison, but both eventually reunited. In 2008, Smokes and Jenkins were married in the visiting room at Fishkill prison. Warren and Williams married in 2011. That year, they had a daughter, Kali, and Smokes became her godfather. Kali was now seven and very inquisitive. Each time Warren came home from court, she wanted to know what had happened. "Of course she has questions. So me, being the parent, I have to answer them truthfully," he told me. "She's a daddy's girl, so she's always going to root for me."

The hearing continued into the winter, with court dates every few weeks. On December 20, 2018, Warren testified, wearing a tan button-down shirt and no tie. He sat with his hands clasped in front of him, leaning toward the microphone as if he wanted to make certain that not a single word was lost.

He spoke about the night his mother had fetched him at Williams's apartment, and how George Delgrosso, the lead detective on the case, had been waiting for him at his home. The detective, who had not told Warren's mother that he was investigating a homicide, took Warren to the Seventy-fifth Precinct, where he questioned him without an adult relative or a lawyer present.

"Do you know whether Detective Delgrosso knew that you were only sixteen years old?" Henning asked.

"Yes, he did."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he had a picture of me with my birth date on it."

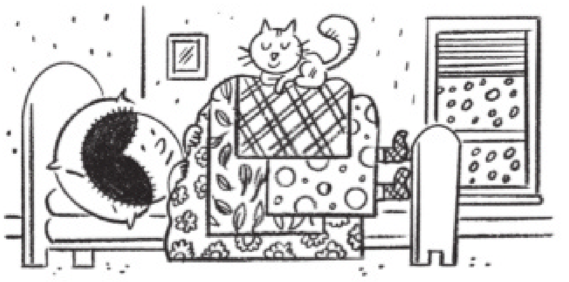
Warren said he had been "scared shitless," and that the detective "seemed to get angry." He went on, "Guess that he was expecting me to tell him something that I couldn't tell him. I was telling him the truth. I guess he didn't believe the truth."

Warren remained composed until Henning asked him a final question: "David, why are you seeking to overturn your conviction?"

"Why wouldn't I seek it? I lived with the stain of being a convicted murderer for thirty-two years," he said. "My grandfather went to his grave thinking I did this." Warren paused. "Can I get a minute?" he asked. "I just need a minute."

Without waiting for the judge to answer, he stepped off the witness stand and collapsed, sobbing, in a chair on the side of the courtroom. One of his lawyers brought him a handkerchief; the other sat at the defense table, head in one hand, also in tears. The judge declared a break. Warren remained seated on the side of the courtroom, his body heaving with sobs.

After the break, Keenan cross-examined Warren. In order to get out of prison, Warren had been required to appear before the state parole board. Prisoners almost never receive parole if they insist they are innocent, so Warren had said that he was guilty. Keenan asked, "Do you recall making this statement to the parole board?" She read from a piece of paper: " 'A person lost his life, and I heartily regret that decision.' "



"Yes, ma'am," he said. "My mother was getting, you know, elderly. . . . I had to make a decision." He went on, "At that point in my life, I was, like, 'Look, they saying I did it. Just go with it. Go home to your family.' That's how I felt." He added, "You had to walk in my shoes to understand my position." As Warren stepped off the witness stand, he looked spent. He returned to the defense table and slumped in his chair.

Smokes testified on January 3, 2019, the thirty-second anniversary of the day that he and Warren were first questioned by the police. Smokes spoke about the degrees he had earned in prison—a bachelor's from Mercy College and a master's from New York Theological Seminary—and about how difficult it had been to find a job with a murder conviction on his record. His voice quavered when he spoke about his mother, who had died while he was in prison.

Keenan read aloud from statements that Smokes had made before the parole board, taking responsibility for the crime, and insisted that they proved his guilt. She also suggested that Smokes was trying to overturn his conviction because, if he succeeded, he could file a lucrative lawsuit against the city.

"So your plan is to sue the city for monetary damages?" she asked.

"Should I prevail, yes," Smokes said.

She asked if he was "aware of the Central Park Five," and added, "You are aware of the fact in 2014 they were given a forty-one-million-dollar settlement from the city?"

"I know they prevailed," he said. "I don't know the amount."

As it happened, Smokes's efforts to clear his name long preceded that payout. In August of 2010, while he was still in prison, Smokes had sent a letter about his case to District Attorney Vance. He received a reply from Bonnie Sard, then the chief of the Conviction Integrity Program. Sard wrote, "The claims you raise in your letter will undergo a preliminary review and you should expect to receive a response or request for additional information within the next couple of months."

Smokes's attorney asked if he had ever received another letter from the Conviction Integrity Program.

"No," Smokes said. "I was looking for it."

The judge turned to him. "You didn't get it?" he asked.

"No," Smokes said. "Nothing came."

In the summer of 2012, Vance gave a speech at the New York City Bar Association titled "The Conscience and Culture of a Prosecutor." In the previous two decades, there had been several hundred exonerations based on DNA evidence in the United States. These exonerations, Vance said, "have shown all of us that an innocent person can land in prison, despite the best efforts of a prosecutor, a judge, and a jury." In recent years, an increasing number of defendants—including those who cannot rely on DNA—have tried to overturn their convictions. According to the National Registry of Exonerations, there were a hundred and forty exonerations in the U.S. in 2019. There are now fifty-four conviction-review units in D.A.'s offices across the country, which were involved in more than a third of last year's exonerations.

In his speech, Vance said that, when he set up the Conviction Integrity Program, he'd thought that some prosecutors "might chafe at the prospect of their colleagues looking over their shoulders, to investigate claims of innocence or impropriety." He'd worried, too, about whether prosecutors reviewing convictions "would feel inhibited by conducting a full-scale reinvestigation of the work of someone who may be a longtime friend or a trusted colleague." He added, "I'm happy to report today that the office culture, I believe, is committed to this endeavor, and that fears that we anticipated simply have not materialized." In a speech the year before, he had announced, "Our results have been unequivocal. The system we have devised works."

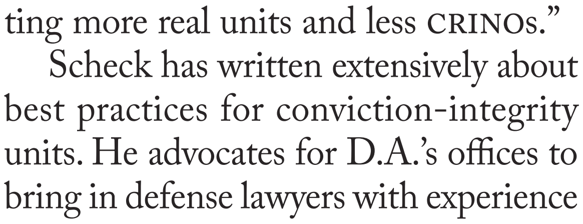
But for many years Vance's office would not reveal whom it had exonerated. In 2018, the journalist Tom Robbins, writing for the Marshall Project and *New York* magazine, pressed the office for details. Vance gave him seven names. After looking into those cases, Robbins wrote, he found that "one of the defendants on Vance's list was convicted after a retrial, while another was released only after he pleaded guilty to lesser charges." He concluded, "All told, after eight years, Vance's unit has exonerated only five defendants who were wrongly convicted—compared to two dozen in Brooklyn."

Vance's office asked a judge to vacate the convictions of two male co-defendants later that year, after a collaborative investigation with their defense teams. Barry Scheck, a co-founder of the Innocence Project, which pioneered the use of DNA evidence to secure exonerations, was involved in the case. In a press release from the D.A.'s office, Scheck said, "We are hopeful that the Conviction Integrity Unit will make this level of collaboration a standard part of its process moving forward." (The D.A.'s office moved to vacate the conviction of another Scheck client this past January.)

For years, though, New York City defense attorneys have traded stories about their frustrations with Vance's program. "There just haven't been that many reversals coming out of Manhattan," Joel B. Rudin, a civil-rights attorney, told me. Robert Gottlieb, a longtime defense attorney who worked as a prosecutor in the Manhattan D.A.'s office in the late seventies and served on Vance's transition team, brought a case to the Conviction Integrity Program in 2011. He said that, at their first meeting, "there to my right was the very prosecutor who tried the case! My immediate reaction was 'What the hell is he doing here?' It was his trial that had to be investigated and reviewed. And, not only was he sitting there, but he interrupted me while I was speaking."

John Hollway, who oversees the Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice, at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, told me, "There are jurisdictions that are earnestly involved in good-faith review of cases where there's a possibility the system reached the wrong conclusion. There are also jurisdictions that have a smoke-and-mirrors approach. They say they'll establish a unit, but then they don't take the cases sincerely and earnestly." These units are often referred to as "CRINOs," short for "conviction review in name only." These days, Hollway said, "I think we're getting more real units and less CRINOs."

Scheck has written extensively about best practices for conviction-integrity units. He advocates for D.A.'s offices to bring in defense lawyers with experience in wrongful-conviction cases to oversee their units, as has been done in Philadelphia. To conduct a true reinvestigation, he said, "you have to come at it with a completely open mind." Rudin told me, "If the district attorney doesn't put in a structure that's independent of the original prosecution and trust it, and doesn't act with a skeptical mind toward old convictions that have been obtained on flimsy evidence, then it's worthless." He went on, "They assume that when someone's been prosecuted and convicted that they're guilty, and they don't want to face the unpleasant truth sometimes that they've sent someone to prison who isn't."



One day in court, Christine Keenan announced, "This case has been thoroughly reinvestigated." She did not give any details, but the review did not seem to have been especially thorough. At the start of Smokes and Warren's hearing, in the fall of 2018, Keenan had not seen the original police file for the case. She said that she had asked an investigator to retrieve it from the Midtown North Precinct, but was told that the file was not there. In December of 2018, she told the judge, "We found this file on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, because I personally crawled through a disgusting basement in the police precinct."

Sussman, the attorney, shot back, "Why wasn't this done a year ago? Why wasn't this done two years ago?"

As the hearing went on, it became increasingly contentious. On January 25, 2019, the lead prosecutor on the 1987 case, Michael Goldstein, came to court. He had worked in the D.A.'s office throughout the eighties, and now had a private practice. As Henning asked him detailed questions, he started to seem annoyed, resting his head on his palm. "It was a very big trial," he said. "There was a lot going on." Before the trial, Goldstein had written a confidential memo for his supervisor, noting, "This case has a number of problems." Now, confronted with this memo, he said, "Most cases aren't easy—they all have problems."

When it was Keenan's turn to question Goldstein, she ran through the statements that the defense's witnesses had made about being coerced by law enforcement. At times, her questioning seemed like a defense of the prosecutorial profession: "Did you ever in your career put a witness on the witness stand to testify when you thought he was lying?" "Have you ever threatened a witness?" "Would you ever urge anyone to testify falsely?" Goldstein answered no to all these questions.

George Delgrosso, the lead detective, testified on February 11, 2019. Delgrosso, who had retired from the N.Y.P.D. in 2001, was now in his mid-sixties, with a ruddy complexion and white hair. The first questions he faced concerned an incident that had occurred in 1978. Delgrosso had got into a bar fight with another police officer which left the other man unconscious. Afterward, he falsely claimed that a group of neighborhood kids had started the fight and assaulted them both. He testified that the story was "fabricated" by his police-union delegate and his attorney. The truth came out during an N.Y.P.D. Internal Affairs Bureau investigation; Delgrosso received a five-day suspension. When Delgrosso testified at Smokes and Warren's trial, the jurors were not informed of this incident.

Sussman asked Delgrosso about an anonymous call that the N.Y.P.D. had received on January 3, 1987. The caller said that "he wanted to offer the name of the person who killed the elderly Frenchman on New Year's Eve," according to a report typed up by a detective. When asked how he knew who had committed this crime, the caller said that he had been "the lookout" for the robbery, and had not known that the other man "was going to kill anybody." The caller gave an address in the Bronx, and he said the perpetrator could be found there, "using crack." According to the police report, the caller "stated the wallet was at the apartment."

Delgrosso never followed up on this tip. "We felt that it was not credible," he testified, explaining that the caller had "stated that it was just him and the perpetrator on the block when the old man was killed." (The caller had actually said, "There were a few people walking in the street." Others had said that the street was more crowded.) Delgrosso also said the police doubted the caller's credibility because he had referred to the victim's wallet. "Mr. Casse's wallet was not taken," Delgrosso said. "It was a billfold with money." (Casse's widow had said it was a "small wallet billfold.")

On the witness stand, Delgrosso denied any wrongdoing in his handling of the case. Then Keenan asked him about Anthony's claim that the police had pressured him to coöperate by suggesting that he might become a suspect: "Did you ever tell Mr. Anthony that you were going to show his picture around, and that, if he was identified as a participant in a crime, that he could be arrested?"

Delgrosso admitted that this was true. "I told him we were going to use his photograph to investigate not only this case but other cases that happened on New Year's Eve," he said. And that, "if his photograph was picked out, he may be charged with something."

By the spring of 2019, two of the four witnesses who had placed Smokes and Warren at the crime scene, Robert Anthony and Kevin Burns, had recanted. The other two were Anthony's cousins, Andre and Alfonso Houston. Keenan flew to California to meet with Andre, and Henning spoke to him by phone. They both declined to call him as a witness. According to Henning, Andre made it clear that he did not want to be involved in the case. The Houstons' absence from the courtroom weighed on Smokes, who told me that he wondered why they "won't display the full transparency to tell the truth and correct the lie." (Efforts to reach them for this story were unsuccessful.)

In June, Henning and Sussman submitted their final memo to Judge Antignani, arguing that they had met their burden of proof and that he should throw out the men's convictions. Keenan, in her response memo, described Anthony's and Burns's testimonies as "inherently unbelievable." The defense had claimed that witnesses "gave the police manufactured testimony because they were told they were potential suspects, that their pictures would be shown around, and that they could be arrested if they were identified," she wrote. "These tactics are not coercive. Instead, the detectives were explaining to uncooperative witnesses what might happen." The memo also accused Smokes of "playing for a payday," and noted that he had been in contact with a few witnesses before the hearing. Keenan wrote that he was trying "to ensure that the witnesses were saying what Smokes wanted them to say." (Smokes had testified that he had contacted them to ask if he could pass on their phone numbers to his attorneys.)

The hearing was nearing its end, but none of the lawyers seemed to realize that many of Goldstein's files had gone unexamined. In early October, I visited the New York City Municipal Archives, and found a faded crimson folder with "Homicide Bureau" written on the front. Inside were manila file folders, each labelled by hand: "Detective George Del Grosso," "James Walker," "Robert Anthony," "Evidence."

An expense report in one folder caught my eye. In Keenan's memo to the judge, she had seized on one of Burns's claims at the hearing. Before the murder trial, he said, a man he called "the guy with the badge" had told him that, "if I testify against Smokes, he can make my life better." Burns said that after he testified the man gave him ten packs of Marlboros. Keenan insisted that this had never happened. Burns's "claims sound so much like a cheap novel because that is what they are—bad

"Larry! Not my grandmother's Amish star quilt!"

• •

fiction," she wrote. But Goldstein's expense report included $17.41 for "cigarettes and soap for inmate." The attached receipt was dated the day that Burns had testified.

As I studied Goldstein's files, I kept thinking about a phrase that Henning had used to describe the murder investigation: an "inherently flawed exercise in tunnel vision." After James Walker gave police Smokes's name, the investigation had focussed on Smokes and Warren. But there had been plenty of reasons to be wary of Walker. At Canarsie High School, he had been in a class for "emotionally disturbed" students, and he was transferred out "for being constantly in fights," according to records in Goldstein's file. In the months before Walker testified at the murder trial, he was arrested for the sixth and seventh times.

Still, detectives and prosecutors had believed Walker's claims and disregarded those of Niles Williams, who was with Smokes and Warren on New Year's Eve. Williams, who was nineteen at the time and had a full-time job delivering beer, had testified on their behalf, vouching for their whereabouts the entire night.

Before the trial, the police had interviewed Williams repeatedly, and Goldstein had compiled a file on him. When I opened it, I found some of Williams's school records. One teacher had written, "Niles is a lovely boy with a good sense of humor." Another described him as a "quiet, responsible child."

Williams now lives in North Carolina. When I called him recently, he vividly remembered being questioned by law-enforcement officers in this case. "That's scary for any young black guy," he said. "I thought they were going to charge me." He became more distraught as he spoke. "It had me real upset, because I knew it was not the truth, because we never made it to the area where the crime happened," he said. "I kept telling them the same thing over and over."

On January 14th, the date that Judge Antignani had set to announce his decision, jury selection for Harvey Weinstein's trial had recently begun. At the courthouse across the street, there were Court TV trucks and a dozen officers in bulletproof vests. Smokes and Warren met in front of 111 Centre Street; this time, they had brought their wives, relatives, and friends. Warren's daughter, Kali, had taken the day off from school, and was dressed up in a skirt, white tights, and black patent-leather shoes.

Shortly after 10 A.M., the group filed into the courtroom. Smokes and Warren sat in the back row. As they waited for the proceeding to begin, Smokes held his head back, eyes closed. A clerk called out their names, and they walked to the front, sitting beside their attorneys.

Antignani addressed the lawyers first. "It was a pleasure having each of you in my courtroom in front of me," he said. "You taught me a lot. Each of you were thorough, prepared, knew your stuff. . . . I just want to thank *you* for guiding me throughout this case."

He continued, "To Mr. Smokes and Mr. Warren, I realize that what you both want is a decision, and that will be forthcoming. But you also both demonstrated in my courtroom the utmost respect for the process, and I appreciate that as well."

He announced, "I'm going to give out my decisions now." A court officer delivered a stack of papers to each attorney. The judge summed up his ruling: Smokes and Warren "had the burden of proof" in this case, and "the court has not been persuaded." The defendants' motion was "denied in all respects." He concluded, "That is the ruling of the court. Court is adjourned."

The courtroom remained silent. Slowly, Smokes, Warren, and their families walked out. In the hall, a *Daily News* reporter and two television crews gathered around Smokes and Warren, asking for their reaction. Warren's eyes filled with tears, and Smokes spoke. "I'm devastated," he said. "No question, I'm going to keep fighting. I don't have no other choice but to keep fighting."

Judge Antignani's decision echoed many of the arguments that Keenan had made in her memo to the court. He found Robert Anthony and Kevin Burns "not credible." He gave "limited credence" to James Walker's affidavit, because Walker had died before he could be cross-examined. He also questioned whether the police tactics that the witnesses had described amounted to intimidation. "Defendants ask this court to believe that coercion, intimidation and threats by law enforcement led many witnesses to testify falsely against Smokes and Warren," he wrote. "The evidence presented at the hearing belies this contention. No witness testified that the police used any physical threats or physical force to obtain testimony." He characterized Smokes's and Warren's testimonies at their parole hearings as "compelling evidence of their guilt."

Henning and Sussman plan to appeal the ruling, but there is no guarantee that the appeal will be heard. First, they have to persuade the Appellate Division to accept their case, and, even if they are successful, they may have to wait two years for the court's decision. The day after Antignani's ruling, the *Daily News* ran a photo of Smokes and Warren beneath the headline "STILL GUILTY IN '87 SLAY."

Three days later, I called Warren, and he patched in Smokes on a three-way call. Both men said that they had started reviewing the judge's decision, but found it too painful to read every page. Smokes was particularly incensed by the claim that he and Warren had "an interest in the outcome of the motion beyond simply restoring their reputation." Judge Antignani had written, "They admitted that, should their conviction be overturned, they will seek significant civil damages."

"I'm highly insulted that the judge would think that we're trying to scam the system, that we're doing this for money," Smokes said. "I'm disgusted." For years, friends had been telling Smokes that he should put the past behind him. But, he said, "this follows me. This is the albatross, the thing that hangs around my neck." Warren said, "It's like a noose on my neck I got to wear for the rest of my life."

Warren said that Kali kept asking questions. "She was, like, 'Dad, why did they deny you? Why do they keep trying to say you did something you didn't do?'" Warren did not "want her to think the system is all bad," he said, so he promised that they would talk about it when she was a little older. Still, he said, "she wants to know: if they made a mistake, why don't they just correct the mistake? She can't understand why they just don't want to correct it." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

X-TREME RULES OF THE X.F.L.

BY ELI COYOTE MANDEL

> It was a professional football league that lasted for one season 19 years ago, but memories of the XFL are surprisingly vivid. . . . The old XFL celebrated its edginess, even promising glimpses into the cheerleaders' locker rooms. "We are gimmick-free," the new league president, Jeffrey Pollack, said. "And we don't even have cheerleaders."
>
> —*The Times.*

Good news, football fans! The X.F.L. is back. That's right, the X-Treme Football League returned on February 8th with X-TREME personalities, X-TREME fans, and X-TREME game play! But X-Actly how does the X.F.L. revolutionize and X-Treme-alize the boring old No Fun League? To answer your questions, we have created this helpful guide to usher you through the X-Citing, X-Cessive, and X-Treme game of X.F.L. football!

Each team gets only one helmet. Perhaps you remember last year when Myles Garrett completely bonked what's-his-name on the head with his own helmet. Well, *some* people had a problem with this, so to address the issue the X.F.L. has dramatically reduced the number of helmets in the game.

Everyone stands for the national anthem. And by "national anthem" we mean Kid Rock's "Bawitdaba," and by "stands" we mean shreds an air guitar.

No weather delays. Imagine this scene. Fourth and nine. Late in the game. Clouds roll in. The running back catches the ball out of the backfield. Lightning crashes all around him. BOW! BOW! BLAMMO! He shrugs off linebackers and weaves through bolts of pure electricity en route to a sixty-yard score! I mean, that'd be pretty rad, right?

Some players get to use wheels. Whatever that means to you.

When you score a touchdown, you get to shoot a gun. One time. Anywhere you want. It can be at the other team, but it doesn't have to be.

Mandatory reality television. The N.F.L. produces the HBO hit "Hard Knocks." Well, get ready for the X.F.L.'s own "Knocks That Aren't as Hard, but We Hope the Game of Football Is So Popular/Profitable That People Will Watch Anything Even Remotely Related to It." Coming this month to CBS All Access!

Unique salary structure. I'll tell you right now, we will not have enough money to pay our players. So we'll be passing a hat around the stadium to help these guys out. Please be generous.

No Gatorade on the sidelines. We have reached an exclusive deal to make Twisted Tea® the official alcoholic-iced-tea beverage of the X.F.L. Hydrate responsibly!

Therefore, no Gatorade baths. Twisted Tea® is too delicious, valuable, and refreshing to waste dumping on the winning coach. Hope you like scalding-hot coffee, skipper!

Every team will be named for a racial slur. In the N.F.L., Washington is the most notable franchise marketing itself using an outdated, hateful, and ignorant phrase. Not anymore! Keep an eye out for the Seattle ********, the St. Louis *****, and, of course, the Tampa Bay ******************.

Old, old players. Tom Brady says he wants to play until he's forty-five. Well, we've beaten the N.F.L. once again. They may not run fast, throw deep, or remember their children's birthdays, but our players know where they were when Kennedy was shot.

Cheap franchises, perfect for real-estate moguls. President Trump has long dreamed of owning an N.F.L. team, but you usually have to be a billionaire to do so. Therefore, we're dramatically lowering the price of an X.F.L. franchise so Donny can get in on the action.

All replays handled by Dennis. We're tired of élite league officials in New York pushing their liberal agenda with these replay decisions. In the X.F.L., if there is a questionable call on the field, we'll text our pal Dennis to get his gut reaction. He's usually good with this stuff. I mean, the guy guesses the winner of "The Bachelor" every season.

The captain of the winning team gains the ancient right of primae noctis. This one is pretty self-explanatory.

Premium defensive celebrations. To insure that our sack and interception celebrations are second to none, each defensive player will be required to complete the acting program at N.Y.U.'s Tisch School of the Arts. Ultimately, these celebrations won't be "entertaining," but they just might make you think.

Let's give the ladies something to look at. Hogs out, fellas!

Weird uniforms. If there is one thing that I can promise you about the X.F.L. (and all future alternative football leagues), it's that the uniforms will be jarring to behold.

There you have it! Now that you're an expert on the X.F.L., we'll see you next week, when the ****** take on the **********. Presented by Twisted Tea®. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

PERSONAL HISTORY

UNBUTTONED

Father and son.

BY DAVID SEDARIS

I was in Paris, waiting to undergo what promised to be a pretty disgusting medical procedure, when I got word that my father was dying. The hospital I was in had opened in 2000, but it seemed newer. From our vantage point in the second-floor radiology department, Hugh and I could see the cafés situated side by side in the modern, sun-filled concourse below. "It's like an airline terminal," he observed.

"Yes," I said. "Terminal Illness."

Under different circumstances, I might have described the place as cheerful. It was the wrong word to use, though, when I'd just had a CT scan and, in a few hours' time, a doctor was scheduled to snake a multipurpose device up the hole in my penis. It was a sort of wire that took pictures, squirted water, and had little teeth. These would take bites out of my bladder, which would then be sent to a lab and biopsied. So "cheerful"? Not so much, at least for me.

I'd hoped to stick out in the radiology wing, to be too youthful or hale to fit in, but, looking around the waiting area, I saw that everyone was roughly my age, and either was bald or had gray hair. If anybody belonged here, it was me.

The good news was that the urologist I met with later that afternoon was loaded with personality. This made him the opposite of one I'd seen earlier that month, in London, when I'd gone in with an unmistakable urinary-tract infection. The pain was a giveaway, as was the blood that came out when I peed. U.T.I.s are common in women, but in men are usually a sign of something more serious. The London urologist was sullen and Scottish, the first to snake a multipurpose wire up my penis, but, sadly, not the last. The only time he came to life was when the camera started sending images to the monitor he was looking at. "Ah," he trilled. "There's your sphincter!"

I've always figured there was a reason my insides were on the inside: so I wouldn't have to look at them. Therefore I said something noncommittal, like "Great!," and went back to wishing that I were dead, because it really hurts to have a wire shoved up that narrow and uninviting slit.

The urologist we'd come to see in Paris looked over the results of the scan I'd just undergone and announced that they revealed nothing out of the ordinary. He also studied the results of the tests I'd had in London, including one for my prostate. My eyes had been screwed shut while it took place, but I'm fairly certain it involved forcing a Golden Globe Award up my ass. I didn't cry or hit anyone, though. Thus it annoyed me to see what the English radiologist who'd performed the test had written in the comment section of his report: "Patient tolerated the trans-rectal probe poorly."

How dare he! I thought.

In the end, a quick prostate check and the CT scan were the worst I had to suffer that day in Paris. After taking everything into consideration, the French doctor, who was young and handsome, like someone who'd play a doctor on TV, decided it wasn't the right time to take little bites out of my bladder. "Better to give it another month," he said, adding that I shouldn't worry too much. "Were you younger, your urinary-tract infection might not have been an issue, but at your age it's always best to be on the safe side."

That evening, Hugh and I took the train back to London, and bought next-day plane tickets for the U.S. My father was by then in the intensive-care unit, where doctors were draining great quantities of ale-colored fluid from his lungs. His heart was failing, and he wasn't expected to live much longer. "This could be it," my sister Lisa wrote me in an e-mail.

The following morning, as we waited to board our flight, I learned that he'd

ILLUSTRATION BY ROSS MacDONALD

been taken from intensive care and put in a regular hospital room.

By the time we arrived in Raleigh, my father was back at Springmoor, the assisted-living center he'd been in for the past year. I walked into his room at five in the afternoon and was unnerved by how thin and frail he was. Asleep, he looked long dead, like something unearthed from a pharaoh's tomb. The head of his bed had been raised, so he was almost in a sitting position, his open mouth a dark, seemingly bottomless hole and his hands stretched out before him. The television was on, as always, but the sound was turned off.

"Are you looking for your sister?" an aide asked. She directed us down the hall, where a dozen people in wheelchairs sat watching "The Andy Griffith Show." Just beyond them, in a grim, fluorescent-lit room, Lisa and my sister-in-law, Kathy, were talking to a hospice nurse they had recently engaged. "What's Mr. Sedaris's age?" the young woman asked, as Hugh and I took seats.

"He'll be ninety-six in a few weeks," Kathy said.

"Height?"

Lisa looked through her papers. "Five feet six."

Really? I thought. My father was never super-tall, but I'd assumed he was at least five-nine. Had he honestly shrunk that much?

"Weight?"

More shuffling of papers.

"One-twenty," Lisa answered.

"Well now he's just showing off," I said.

The hospice nurse needed to record my father's blood pressure, so we went back to his room, where Kathy gently shook him awake. "Dad, were you napping?"

When he came to, my father focussed on Hugh. The tubes that had been put down his throat in the hospital had left him hoarse. Speaking was a challenge, thus his "Hey!" was hard to make out.

"We just arrived from England," Hugh said.

My father responded enthusiastically, and I wondered why I couldn't go over and kiss him, or at least say hello. Unless you count his hitting me, we were never terribly physical with each other, and I wasn't sure I could begin at this late date.

"I figured you'd rally as soon as I spent a fortune on last-minute tickets," I said, knowing that if the situation were reversed he'd have stayed put, at least until a discount could be worked out. All he's ever cared about is money, so it had hurt me to learn, a few years earlier, that he'd cut me out of his will. Had he talked it over with me, had he said, for example, that I seemed comfortable enough, it might have been different. But I heard about it secondhand. He'd wanted me to find out after he died. It would be like a scene in a movie, the wealthy man's children crowded into the lawyer's office: "And, to my son David, I leave nothing."

When I confronted him about the will, he said he'd consider leaving me a modest sum, but only if I promised that Hugh would touch none of the money.

Of course I said no.

"Actually, don't worry," I said, of the plane tickets. "I'll just pay for them with part of my inheritance . . . oops."

"Awww, come on now," he moaned. His voice was weak and soft, no louder than rustling leaves.

"I'm going to turn him over and examine his backside for bedsores," the hospice nurse said. "So if any of y'all need to turn away . . ."

I was in the far corner of the room, beneath a painting my father had made in the late sixties of a monk with a mustache. Beside me was the guitar I was given in the fifth grade. "What's this doing here?" I asked.

"Dad had it restrung a few months ago and said he was going to learn how to play," Lisa told me. She pointed to a keyboard wedged behind a plaster statue of a joyful girl with her arms spread wide. "The piano, too."

"*Now*?" I asked. "He's had all this time but decided to wait until he was connected to tubes?"

After the hospice nurse had finished, my father's dinner was brought in, all of it puréed, like baby food. Even his water was mixed with a thickener that gave it the consistency of nectar.

"He has a bone that protrudes from the back of his neck and causes food to go down the wrong way," Lisa explained. "So he can't have anything solid or liquid."

As Kathy spooned the mush into my father's mouth, Hugh picked the can of thickener up off the dinner tray, read the ingredients, and announced that it was just cornstarch.

"So how was your flight?" Lisa asked us.

Time crawled. Amber-colored urine

SWANN
AUCTION GALLERIES

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"We can't chant 'Om' if everybody lip-synchs."

slowly collected in the bag attached to my father's catheter. The room was sweltering.

"Was that dinner O.K., Dad?" Lisa asked.

He raised a thumb. "Excellent."

How had she and Paul and Kathy managed to do this day after day? Conversation was pretty much out of the question, so they mainly offered observations in louder than normal voices: "She was nice," or "It looks like it might start raining again."

I was relieved when my father got drowsy, and we could all leave and go to dinner. "Do you want me to turn your TV to Fox News?" Lisa asked, as we put our coats on.

"Fox News," my father mumbled.

Lisa picked up the remote, but when she jabbed it in the direction of the television nothing happened. "I can't figure out which channel that is, so why don't you watch 'CSI: Miami' instead?"

Amy arrived from New York at ten the following morning, wearing a black-and-white polka-dot coat she'd bought on our last trip to Tokyo. Instead of taking her straight to Springmoor, Hugh and I drove her to my father's place, where we met up with Lisa and Gretchen. Our dad started hoarding in the late eighties: a broken ceiling fan here, an expired can of peaches there, until eventually the stuff overtook him and spread into the yard. I hadn't been inside the house since before he was moved to Springmoor, and, though Lisa had worked hard at clearing it of junk, the over-all effect was still jaw-dropping. His car, for instance, looked like the one in "Silence of the Lambs" that the decapitated head was found in. You'd think it had been made by spiders out of dust and old pollen. It was right outside the front door, and acted as an introduction to the horrors that awaited us.

"Whose turd is this on the floor next to the fireplace?" I called out, a few minutes after descending the filthy carpeted stairs into the basement.

Amy looked over my shoulder at it, as did Hugh and, finally, Lisa, who said, "It could be my dog's from a few months ago."

I leaned a bit closer. "Or it could be—"

Before I could finish, Hugh scooped it up with his bare hands and tossed it outside. "You people, my God." Then he went upstairs to help Gretchen make lunch.

Continuing through the house, I kept asking the same question: "Why would anyone choose to live this way?" It wasn't just the falling-down ceilings or the ragged spiderwebs draped like bunting over the doorways. It wasn't the tools and appliances he'd found on various curbs—the vacuum cleaners with frayed cords or the shorted-out hair dryers he'd promised himself he would fix—but the sense of hopelessness they conveyed when heaped into rooms that used to seem so normal, no different in size or design from those of our neighbors, but were now ruined. "Whoever buys this house will just have to throw a match on it and start over," Gretchen said.

What struck me most were my father's clothes. Hugh gets after me for having too many, but I've got nothing compared with my dad, who must own twenty-five suits and twice as many sports coats. Dozens of them were from Brooks Brothers, when there was just the one store in New York and the name meant something. Others were from long-gone college shops in Ithaca and Syracuse, the sort that sold smart jackets and white bucks. There were sweaters in every shade: the cardigans on hangers, their sleeves folded in a self-embrace to prevent them from stretching; the V-necks and turtlenecks folded in stacks, a few unprotected, but mostly moth-proofed in plastic bags. There were polo shirts and dress shirts and casual shirts from every decade of postwar America. Some hung like rags—buttons missing, great tears in the backs, as if he'd worn them while running too slowly from bears. Others were still in their wrapping, likely bought two or three years ago. I could remember him wearing most of the older stuff—to the club, to work, to the parties he'd attend, always so handsome and stylish.

Though my mother's clothes had been disposed of—all those shoulder pads moldering in some landfill—my father's filled seven large closets, one of them a walk-in, and hung off the shower-curtain rods in all three bathrooms. They were crammed into dressers and piled on shelves. Hats and coats and scarves and gloves. Neckties and bow ties, too many to count, all owned by the man who since his retirement seemed to wear nothing but the same jeans and same T-shirt with holes in it he'd worn the day before, and the day before that; the man who'd always found an excuse to skimp on others, but allowed himself only the best. There were clothes from his self-described fat period, from the time he slimmed down, and from the years since my mother died, when he's been out-and-out skinny: none of them thrown away or donated to Goodwill, and all of them now reeking of mildew.

I nicked a vibrant red button-down shirt from the fifties, noticing later that it had a sizable hole in the back. Then I claimed the camel-colored, moth-eaten beret I'd bought him on a school trip to Madrid in 1975.

"It suits you," Hugh observed.

"It matches your skin and makes you look bald," Amy said.

We were all in the dining room, going through boxes with more boxes in them, when I glanced over at the window and saw a doe step out of the woods and approach some of the trash on the lawn near the carport, head lowered, as if she'd followed the scent of fifty-year-old house paint hardened in rusted-through cans. "Look," we whispered, afraid our voices from inside the house might frighten her off. "Isn't she beautiful!" We couldn't remember there being deer in the woods when we were young. Perhaps our dogs had scared them off.

"Oh," Lisa said, her voice as soft as our father's. "I hope she doesn't step on a rusty nail."

Gretchen served Greek food for lunch, and afterward we drove to Springmoor. It was a Saturday afternoon in late February, cold and raining. Our father was in his reclining chair covered with a blanket when we arrived, not asleep but not exactly awake, either. It was this new state he occasionally drifted into: neither here nor there. After killing the overhead lights, we seated ourselves around his room and continued the conversation we'd been having in the car.

"I asked Marshall to write Dad's obituary, but he doesn't feel up to it," Gretchen said, referring to her boyfriend of nearly thirty years.

The rest of us glanced over at our father.

"He can't hear us," Gretchen said. She looked at me. "So will *you* write it?"

I've been writing about my father for ages, but when it comes to the details of his life, the year he graduated from

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THE NEW YORKER

college, etc., I'm worthless. Even his job remains a mystery to me. He was an engineer, and I like to joke that up until my late teens I thought that he drove a train. "I don't really know all that much about him," I said, scooting my chair closer to his recliner. He looked twenty years older than he had on my last visit to Raleigh, six months earlier. One change was his nose. The skin covering it was stretched tight, revealing facets I'd never before noticed. His eyes were shaped differently, like the diamonds you'd find on playing cards, and his mouth looked empty, though it was in fact filled with his own teeth. He did this thing now, opening wide and stretching out his lips, as if pantomiming a scream. I kept thinking it was in preparation for speech, but then he'd say nothing.

I was trying to push the obituary off on Lisa when we heard him call for water.

Hugh got a cup, filled it from the tap in the bathroom, and stirred in some cornstarch to thicken it. My father's oxygen tube had fallen out of his nose, so we summoned a nurse, who showed us how to reattach it. When she left, he half raised his hand, which was purpled with spots and resembled a claw.

"What's on your . . . mind?" he asked Amy, who had always been his favorite, and was seated a few yards away. His voice couldn't carry for more than a foot or two, so Hugh repeated the question.

"What's on your mind?"

"You," Amy answered. "I'm just thinking of you and wanting you to feel better."

My father looked up at the ceiling, and then at us. "Am I . . . real to you kids?" I had to lean in close to hear him, especially the last half of his sentences. After three seconds he'd run out of steam, and the rest was just breath. Plus the oxygen machine was loud.

"Are you what?"

"Real." He gestured to his worn-out body, and the bag on the floor half filled with his urine. "I'm in this new . . . life now."

"It'll just take some getting used to," Hugh said.

My father made a sour face. "I'm a zombie."

I don't know why I insisted on contradicting him. "Not really," I said. "Zombies can walk and eat solid food. You're actually more like a vegetable."

"I know you," my father said to me. He looked over at Amy, and at the spot that Gretchen had occupied until she left. "I know all you kids so well."

I wanted to say that he knew us superficially at best. It's how he'd have responded had I said as much to him: "You don't *know* me." Surely my sisters felt the way I did, but something—most likely fatigue—kept them from mentioning it.

As my father struggled to speak, I noticed his fingernails, which were long and dirty.

"If I just . . . dropped out of the sky like this . . . you'd think I was a freak."

"No," I said. "*You'd* think you were a freak, or at least a loser."

Amy nodded in agreement, and I plowed ahead. "It's what you've been calling your neighbors here, the ones parked in the hall who can't walk or feed themselves. It's what you've always called weak people."

"You're a hundred per cent right," he said.

I didn't expect him to agree with me. "You're vain," I continued. "Always were. I was at the house this morning and couldn't believe all the clothes you own. Now you're this person, trapped in a chair, but you're still yourself to us. You're like . . . like you were a year ago, but drunk."

"That's a very astute . . . observation," my father said. "Still, I'd like to . . . apologize."

"For being in this condition?" I asked.

He looked over at Amy, as if she had asked the question, and nodded.

Then he turned to me. "David," he said, as if he'd just realized who I was. "You've accomplished so many fantastic things in your life. You're, well . . . I want to tell you . . . you . . . you won."

A moment later he asked for more water, and drifted mid-sip into that neither-here-nor-there state. Paul arrived, and I went for a short walk, thinking, of course, about my father, and about the writer Russell Baker, who had died a few weeks earlier. He and I had had the same agent, a man named Don Congdon, who was in his mid-seventies when I met him, in 1994, and who used a lot of outdated slang. "The blower," for instance, was what he called the phone, as in "Well, let me get off the blower. I've been gassing all morning."

"Russ Baker's mother was a tough old bird," Don told me one rainy afternoon, in his office on Fifth Avenue. "A real gorgon to hear him tell it, always insisting that her son was a hack and would never amount to anything. So on her deathbed he goes to her saying, 'Ma, look, I made it. I'm a successful writer for the New York *Times*. My last book won the Pulitzer.'"

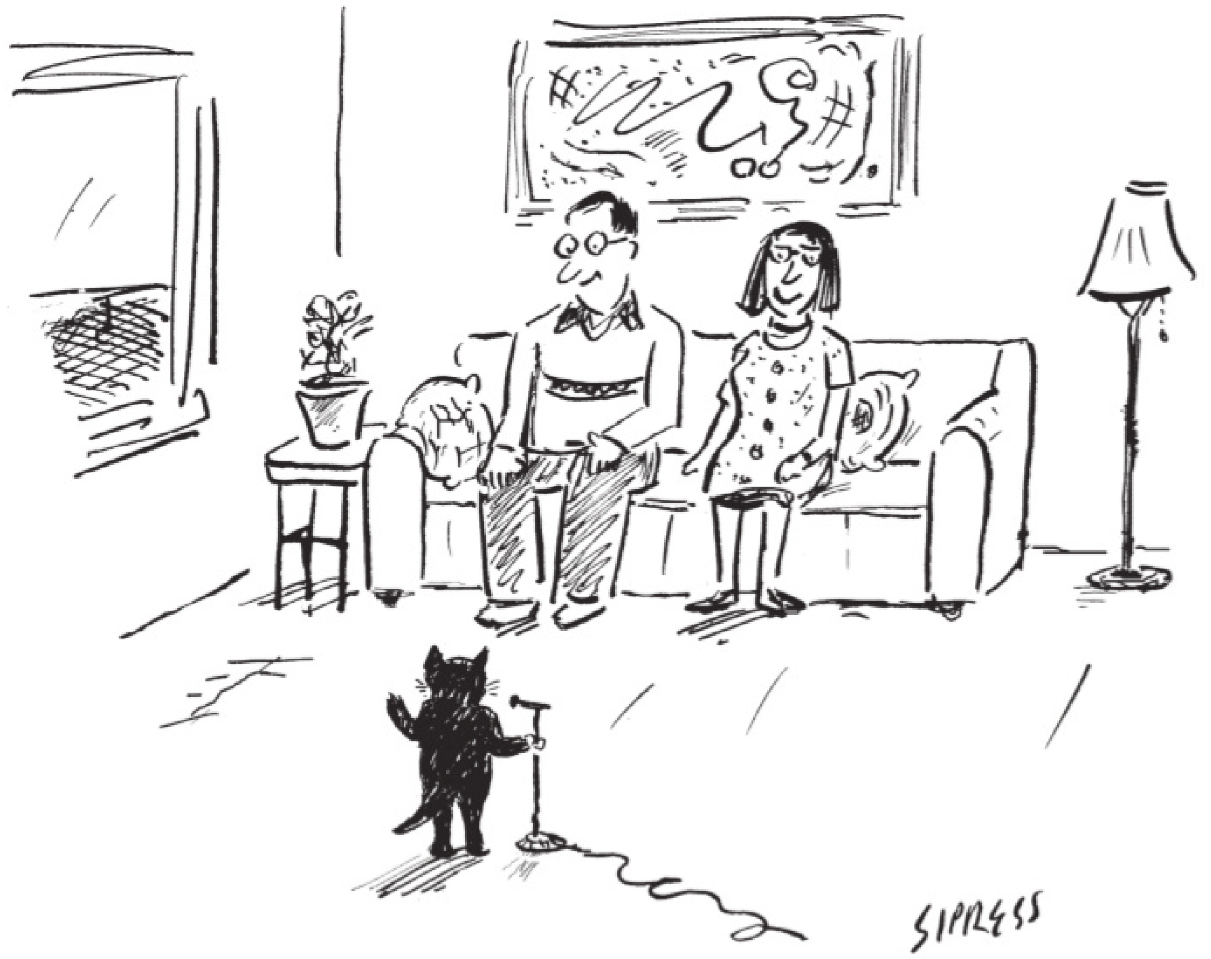
"She looked up at him, her expression blank, and said, 'Who are you?'"

I've been told since then that the story may not be true, but still it struck a nerve with me. Seek approval from the one person you desperately want it from, and you're guaranteed not to get it.

As for my dad, I couldn't tell if he meant "You won" as in "You won the game of life," or "You won over *me*, your father, who told you—assured you when you were small and then kept reassuring you—that you were worthless." Whichever way he intended those two faint words, I will take them, and, in doing so, throw down this lance I've been hoisting for the past sixty years. For I am old myself now, and it is so very, very heavy.

I returned to the room as Kathy was making dinner reservations at a restaurant she'd heard good things about. The menu was updated Southern: fried oysters served with pork belly and collard greens—that kind of thing. The place was full when we arrived, and the diners were dressed up. I was wearing the red shirt I'd taken from my father's closet, and had grown increasingly self-conscious about how strongly it stank of mildew.

"We all smell like Dad's house," Amy noted.



"I know what you've come to expect from me is physical comedy, but tonight I thought we'd try something a little different."

While eating, we returned to the topic of his obituary, and what would follow. A Greek Orthodox funeral is a relatively sober affair, sort of like a Mass. I'd asked if I could speak at my mom's, just so there'd be a personal touch. If I were to revisit what I read that morning in 1991, I'd no doubt cringe. That said, it was easy to celebrate my mother. Effortless. With my father, I'd have to take a different tone. "I remember the way he used to ram other cars at the grocery store when the drivers—who were always women—took the parking spots he wanted," I could say. "Oh, and the time he found seventeen-year-old Lisa using his shower, and dragged her out naked."

How could I reconcile that perpetual human storm cloud with the man I had spent the afternoon with, the one who never mentioned, and has never mentioned, the possibility of dying, who has taken everything life has thrown at him and found a way to deal with it. Me, on the other hand, after half a dozen medical tests involving the two holes below my waist, before even learning whether or not I *had* cancer, I'd decided I was tired of battling it. "Just let me die in peace," I said to Hugh, after the French urologist stuck his finger up my ass.

Meanwhile, here was my father, tended to by aides, afforded no privacy whatsoever, and determined to get used to it. Where did that come from? I wondered, looking at my fried chicken as it was set before me. And how is it that none of his children, least of all me, inherited it?

Of all us kids, Paul was the only one to fight the do-not-resuscitate order. He wanted all measures taken to keep our father alive. "You have to understand," he said over dinner. "Dad is my best friend." He didn't say it in a mawkish or dramatic way, but matter-of-factly, the way you might identify your car in a parking lot: "It's that one there." The relationship between my brother and my father has always been a mystery to my sisters and me. Is it the thickness of their skin? The fact that they're both straight men? On the surface, it seems that all they do is yell at each other: "Shut up." "Go to hell." "Why don't you just suck my dick." It is the vocabulary of conflict, but with none of the hurt feelings or dark intent. While the rest of us may mourn our father's passing, only Paul will truly grieve.

"Hey," he said, taking an uneaten waffle off his daughter's plate. "Did I tell you I just repainted my basement?" He found a picture on his phone and showed me what looked like a Scandinavian preschool, each wall a bold primary color.

"Let me see," Amy said. I handed her the phone and she, in turn, passed it to Lisa. It then went by the spots where Gretchen and Tiffany would be if Tiffany hadn't killed herself and Gretchen hadn't fallen asleep at her boyfriend's house earlier that evening, and on to Kathy, then to my niece, Maddy, and back to Paul.

We were the last party to leave the restaurant, and were standing out front in a light rain, when Amy pointed at the small brick house across the street. "Look," she cried, "a naked lady!"

"Oh, my God," we said, following her finger and lowering our voices the same way we'd done ten hours earlier with the doe on my father's lawn.

"Where?" Lisa whispered.

"Right there, through the window on the ground floor," Hugh told her. He and Amy would later remark that the woman, who was middle-aged and buxom and wore her hair in a style I associate with the nineteen-forties, made them think of a Raymond Chandler novel.

"What's she doing?" I asked, watching as she moved into the kitchen.

"Getting a drink of water?" Lisa guessed.

Paul turned to his daughter. "Look away, Maddy!"

When the light went out, we worried that we had scared the naked woman, but a second later it came back on, and she was joined by a dark-haired man with a towel around his waist. The two of them appeared to speak for a moment. Then he took her by the hand and led her into another room and out of sight.

It was all we talked about as we made our way down the street to our various cars. "Can you believe it? Naked!!" As if we'd seen a flying saucer, or a congregation of pixies. To hear us in a gang like that, the wonder in our voices, the delight and energy, you'd almost think we were children. ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE ALTITUDE SICKNESS

Mountain climbers are intimately familiar with grief and guilt. A therapist thinks he can help.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

In mountain towns, an early-autumn snowstorm is a nuisance and a lure. It runs some people out of the high country but draws others in. During the first week of October, 2017, a foot or more of snow fell in the peaks south of Bozeman, Montana. Before dawn on the fifth, a group set off from a parking lot in Hyalite Canyon, a popular outdoor playground, just outside town. The man at the head of the group was spooked by the new snow. To minimize exposure to avalanches, he made sure that everyone ascended with caution, keeping to the ridgelines and bare patches, away from the loaded gullies. This was Conrad Anker, the famous American alpinist. It is often said that there are old climbers and there are bold climbers, but there are no old bold climbers. So far, Anker, at fifty-four, was an exception.

There was nothing intrepid, really, about this particular outing. It was basically a hike up a minor mountain formerly known as Peak 10031 (for its unremarkable altitude of 10,031 feet), which had been rechristened in 2005 in honor of the late climber and Bozeman idol Alex Lowe. The group was headed to Alex Lowe Peak to spread Alex Lowe's ashes. Anker recognized that it would be cosmically stupid to kick off an avalanche on the way.

Lowe died in 1999, at the age of forty, during an ascent of Shishapangma, in the Himalayas. At the time, he was considered by many to be the world's preëminent alpinist, and, even in a pursuit where untimely death is almost routine, his came as a shock. He was game for anything yet prudent, in his way—more dervish than daredevil. Still, snow is water, and it aims downhill. On Shishapangma, a massive avalanche entombed two climbers, Lowe and the cameraman David Bridges, under tons of frozen debris. A third, Anker, who'd fled in another direction, got flattened and engulfed by the blast, but after the air cleared he found himself stumbling through an altered landscape, alive and alone.

Lowe's wife, Jennifer, back in Bozeman, got the call from base camp twelve hours later. Through the static of the satellite connection, Anker confirmed that her husband was gone. She'd had premonitions and dreams about this trip and—uncharacteristically, because she'd been a climber, too, and a supporter of her husband's exploits—had begged Lowe not to go. But he'd felt obliged, both to his climbing partners and to the North Face and NBC Sports, which were underwriting the expedition. "It's my job," he'd told her. "It's a work trip." She and Lowe had three sons, aged ten, seven, and three.

Lowe's peers had admired him not only for his exploits on rock and ice but for his attentiveness as a husband and father, though it says something about the mountaineer mind-set that a man who spent several months of the year away from home was considered a dutiful dad. "We were all in awe of him because he was able to climb and be a father," Anker told me. Anker and Lowe were best friends, kindred spirits, and regular partners. Anker took it on himself to look after Jenni and the boys, spending more and more time in Bozeman with them, doing what he could to help them muddle through, and also to find a purpose for himself—a reason to live. Less than two years after Alex's death, Anker and Jenni were married. Anker adopted the boys, and Lowe-Anker, as Jenni now called herself, had another world-class climber for a mate, with all the glory, anxiety, and exasperation that entails.

In 2016, while in Nepal, Anker got one of those calls where, as he puts it, you know what the news will be before you even put the phone to your ear. It was from his friend and colleague David Göttler, who was climbing on Shishapangma. He'd come across some old North Face gear, and after some digging had uncovered what appeared to be the bodies of David Bridges and Alex Lowe. Their corpses had melted out of the glacier sooner than anyone had expected—climate change. A couple of months later, Anker, Lowe-Anker, and the three boys travelled to the Himalayas to recover the bodies.

For the boys, the trip was proof that their father was indeed dead, that there was no chance of a miraculous return, something that Max, the eldest, had fantasized about as a child. Anker, for his part, had had a recurring dream in which Lowe showed up to reclaim his brood. "It was all super heavy-duty for me," Anker told me. "Here's his wedding band, here's his camera, here's my water bottle in his daypack." Lowe was found on his back, arms crossed over his chest. "He had his hand with his wedding ring curled against his heart," Lowe-Anker said. It was hard work to dig out the bodies, wrap them up, and haul them down to base camp, including a rappel off a cliff. They'd lugged in a cord of wood and some accelerant. There is no real template for an encounter, in the high alpine, with the frozen corpses of a father, husband, and friend. "We looked at them for a day," Anker said. "And then we wrapped them and cremated them."

These were the ashes that the family brought up to Alex Lowe Peak, a year later. At the top, they scattered the remains and said their farewells—closure, of a kind, eighteen years to the day after Lowe disappeared under the snow. It was dark when they got back to the car.

Earlier that week, Anker had run into a young climber named Hayden Kennedy at a Bozeman climbing gym. Kennedy, twenty-seven, had a few years earlier won a Piolet d'Or,

Conrad Anker in Antarctica, in 2017. Dozens of his friends and climbing partners have died in the mountains.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JIMMY CHIN

the yearly mountaineering awards, for a first ascent of the south face of an infamous tower in Pakistan known as the Ogre. Kennedy, from Colorado, and his girlfriend, Inge Perkins, from Bozeman, had recently moved in together in an apartment in town. Since graduating from high school, Kennedy had lived out of his van, as he built his climbing résumé; Perkins, twenty-three and a strong skier and climber, too, was a senior at Montana State University, majoring in math. Anker lived down the street from the Perkins family and had helped introduce Inge to climbing. He had climbed decades ago with Kennedy's father, Michael, an accomplished mountaineer, and had known Hayden since he was a boy.

Two days after the ceremony on Alex Lowe Peak, Kennedy and Perkins, while ascending Imp Peak, a remote backcountry-skiing spot in a range southwest of Hyalite Canyon, were caught in an avalanche. That early-season snow. Kennedy, partly buried, dug himself out, but there was no sign of Perkins. He searched the debris field for hours, probing and digging, although he must have known that a buried victim almost never survives for longer than twenty minutes. Eventually, he gave up, skied out, and drove back to Bozeman. One can only guess at the panic, anguish, and self-recrimination that coursed through him in the hours that followed—he called no one. In the apartment that night, he wrote a fifteen-page letter and then took a fatal dose of painkillers and alcohol.

Kennedy had never seemed depressed or violent or rash. "He had as untraumatic a childhood as a kid could have," Michael Kennedy told me recently. "What did we not see? We are baffled." Compared with the Ogre, Imp Peak was supposed to be a routine jaunt, a bit of fun. "In his note, he said, 'It's my fault we were there,'" his father went on. "I think what was troubling him in those final hours, though there was nothing explicit about this in his letter, was that he felt he hadn't lived up to his own ideals."

A week before Hayden Kennedy died, he had published a sorrowful essay, on a climbing Web site called Evening Sends, about the recent deaths in the mountains of some of his climbing partners, among them Kyle Dempster, who had accompanied him on the Ogre. Dempster and two others had disappeared the year before in a storm during an attempt on Ogre II. In recent years, the community of the world's top climbers and skiers has seemed to suffer the death rate of a combat platoon. In the essay, Kennedy posed the question that has often dogged people who live through experiences that kill others: "Why do some of us survive and others don't?"

One afternoon last fall, Anker showed me a page in a journal with about three dozen names handwritten on it—friends and partners who'd died, all but a couple of them in mountain accidents, many summoning up tragedies I knew as well as some do Bible stories or baseball lore. The list began with Anker's mentor, Mugs Stump, who fell into a crevasse while descending Denali, in 1992. Scott Adamson, Justin Griffin, Hans Saari, Doug Coombs, Ned Gillette, Mira Šmíd, Hari Berger, Todd Skinner, Walt Shipley, Ang Kaji Sherpa, Ueli Steck, Dean Potter. Martyrs without a cause, except perhaps that of their own fulfillment.

"I had reached out to Hayden before and had talked to him about what loss was," Anker said. "You fall into this pit, right after. It's totally dark. You think about taking your own life. I hadn't really talked much about it before, because there was shame or weakness associated with it."

Late one evening, a week after Kennedy's suicide, Anker called Tim Tate, a psychotherapist in Bozeman. Anker and Tate often went for hikes, and talked about their lives. Tate had helped him and the Lowes work through some dark periods, often marked by the reverberations of what Anker had come to identify as his survivor's guilt—the nagging feeling that he was living someone else's life.

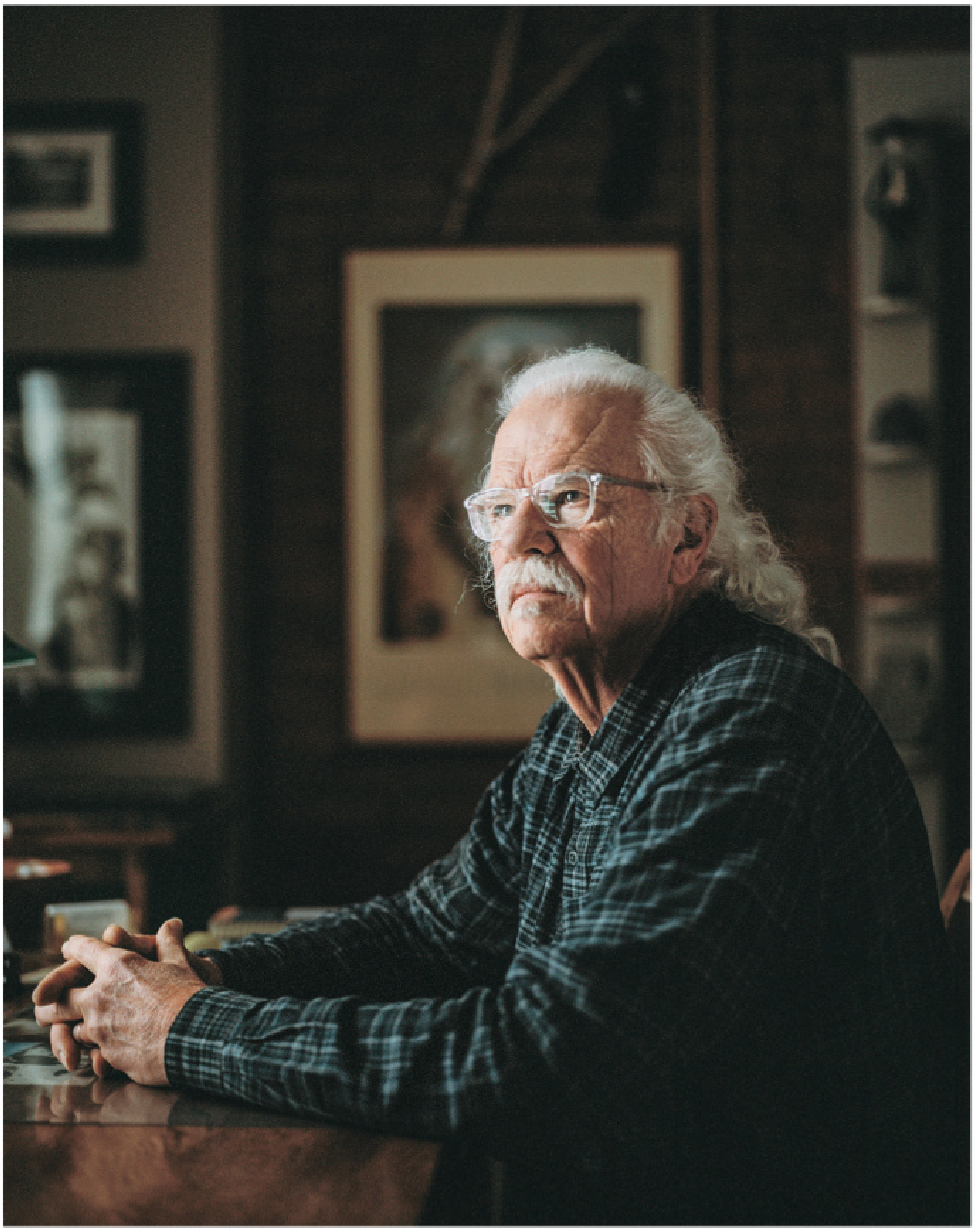
The conversation with Tate was brief, as Anker's conversations often are. Anker wondered if Tate would be open to consulting with the North Face, the outdoor-gear company founded in the Bay Area in 1966, about the problems of loss, grief, and harm. Anker was the captain of the North Face athletes' team, an assemblage of more than a hundred outdoor adventurers—rock climbers, mountaineers, extreme skiers, snowboarders, ultra-runners—who are sponsored by the brand.

The deaths of Kennedy and Perkins had a profound effect on many of the younger North Face athletes, even though the two of them hadn't been affiliated with the company. In the spring of 2018, Anker brought Tate to Alameda, California, to meet with some North Face executives. "I'd like to introduce my mentor, Gandalf," Anker said. This was a reference to Tate's bearing, and his shamanistic attributes, which are deeply rooted, perhaps even innate, and yet not uncultivated. A Jungian by training, and a friend and acolyte of Jung's purported successor, James Hillman, Tate has woven into his practice and self-presentation a variety of rituals and beliefs borrowed from Zen Buddhism and from the indigenous tribes of the northern plains. Tate laid out his approach to mental health and his version of what wellness might mean. "Rather than manage symptoms or problems, I prefer to give people a context for their experiences," he told me recently. "Athletes have a particular calling we need to address. It isn't a mythology of proving themselves. It's a calling they cannot refuse. They have it on a loudspeaker in their brains. They can't help but do what they do."

Soon, Gandalf started appearing at North Face functions, as a kind of visiting sage, and some of the athletes, charmed by his presence, his way of speaking, and his connection to Anker, signed on to see him. Several of them went to Bozeman, on the North Face's dime, to undergo what Tate called intensives, which consisted of two two-hour sessions over two days, the assignment of various tasks, and, if the stars aligned, some mentoring from Anker and Lowe-Anker.

"I grew up as a cowboy," Mark Carter, a snowboarder for the North Face team, told me. "Therapy isn't something we do." Carter was brought up on a cattle ranch in Wyoming and has a side business selling beef. He also has a toothpick sponsorship. He said that the biggest loss in his life was the death of a cousin—same age, same name—a Navy SEAL who died in Iraq in 2007. "Tim gave me homework," Carter said. "He had me write a letter to my cousin. I've spent two months working on it."

Hillary Allen, known to friends as the Hillygoat, is an ultra-runner sponsored by the North Face. She also has a master's degree in neuroscience. In 2017, when she was twenty-eight and competing in a thirty-five-mile "skyrunning" race along a ridge in Norway, a rock gave way, and she fell a hundred and fifty feet. She broke fourteen bones in her back, rib cage, arms, and feet and tore a bunch of ligaments. "I was pretty shaken up," she said. "I had nightmares forever. I was mentally trying to figure out a way to get back. I was dealing with the guilt of wanting to devote myself to something that nearly killed me. People suggested a sports psychologist or a regular counsellor, but that wasn't really the right fit." Instead, she travelled to Bozeman for an intensive with Tate. "He's my cup of tea. I'm a mountain person. I'm not an ooey-gooey dress-everything-in-pink kind of woman."



"They can't help but do what they do," Tim Tate said of the adventure athletes.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN FOR THE NEW YORKER

Tate, seventy-one, has had a therapy practice in Bozeman since the early eighties. After the suicide of a friend who lived near Bozeman, Ted Yates, who had fallen into a cycle of depression and addiction following a bad car accident, Tate discovered that he had a knack for working with grief and loss. Yates's father had been a highly regarded television documentarian who was killed by gunfire while covering the Six-Day War; Yates's stepfather was Mike Wallace, the "60 Minutes" correspondent. Tate presided at Yates's funeral, at an Episcopal church in Georgetown. Afterward, in the back seat of a limousine, he found himself ministering to a distraught Wallace, who'd lost a son in a hiking accident in Greece, in 1962. Wallace told him, "I don't know what you just did there, but I have deep respect for it." Katharine Graham asked if Tate would preside at her funeral, too, he recalled. Tate now wears the Concord Navigator watch that Wallace had given to Yates.

"Grief opens the gate to vulnerability, and for whatever reason that's where I can stand up and be present," Tate told me. "The motif of the elder, the wise man, the shaman, or some sort of wizard dude—it's not anything I promote. It's just me as I am. It has worked well with the athletes."

In late September, Anker and Tate sent me a selfie video: two silverbacks on a ridge during a golden-hour hike. They were inviting me to Bozeman. "Come into our house and see where I work, and see my life with Alex," Anker said. I wondered if he'd meant to say "my life with Jenni," or if this locution was a testament to Lowe's enduring presence, in that house and family and psyche. "It will have been twenty years, on the fifth of October," Anker went on. "And all that we're going through is a really important part of our connection, so—"

Tate said, "And stop by my office for a quick analysis. That never hurts."

Tate greeted me at the airport—with a hug and a "my man"—and we drove into town and went for a walk. My wife and I had lived in Bozeman in the early nineties, just out of college. Alex Lowe was already a celebrity. A friend who lived across the street from the Lowes introduced me to him one day. It was like shaking hands with Michael Jordan. At the time, I had vague notions, inspired by magazine articles and films, of a mountain life—of pushing the envelope a bit on skis—but I quickly ascertained that I had neither the talent nor the tolerance for risk or suffering that any accomplishment on that front would require. My father had lost his father and his sister to avalanches, twenty years apart. The shadow of those tragedies had darkened the lives of my relatives for decades.

I wanted to see the apartment my wife and I had rented. When I pointed out the house, Tate paused a moment and said, "This is also where my wife and I lived, when we first moved to Bozeman." The same house: the coincidence was unnerving. He added, "We moved out after we heard that the last person who'd lived in the apartment had hanged herself there."

That afternoon, we spent some time in his office. Tate sees clients on the ground floor of an old brick house in downtown Bozeman—"behind the blue door," as he often says. (He took the blue-painted front door, his local trademark, from his former office, on Main Street.) He's tall and fit, with a white mustache and soul patch and long, receding poodley hair that he often pulls back in a bun. He wears a tie in the office, on this day with a checked shirt and hiking trousers and boots. The space is decorated with feathers, bones, and cowboy and Native American art. A deluxe edition of Carl Jung's "Red Book" sits on a stand, open to a chapter about Hell. He does as many as seven sessions a day. "I burn cedar between each session for a ceremonial purpose," he said. He harvests the cedar from a tree in the Kootenai National Forest, close to the Canadian border—the same tree every year. "Lots of people are New Age groovy people with sage and all that stuff. I apprenticed with a renegade Crow medicine man for twelve years. So I come by these things honestly. I earned this shit."

Tate has never been a climber or a skier, at least not of the calibre that the North Face athletes who come to see him are. He is, to them, a little like one of those coaches who never played the game but nevertheless grasp something fundamental about it.

"Oh, there's Iza—I know her from my matriarchs' group."

Most of the athletes seem to know little of Tate's past, which is a colorful one. Behind the blue door, they talk and he listens, but, when I got on the couch, I was the one who got to say, "Tell me about your mother." She was a Swede from Michigan, and she met Tate's father, a Presbyterian, at the Moody Bible Institute on Chicago's North Side, where they were training to be missionaries. "He was old school, austere, a fiery man who delivered fire-and-brimstone sermons, using no notes," Tate said. "These were always followed by an overdone roast."

Tate was born when his parents were in their forties, the youngest of four kids, a mistake. Childhood was "belt to the butt," he said. "I wasn't allowed to go to dances." Tate followed an older brother to a Presbyterian college in Dubuque, with plans to join the ministry, and fell in love with a cheerleader whose father, a German, was also a Presbyterian minister. The couple spent their junior year abroad with her family, near Stuttgart, and got married so they could move in together. Tate was twenty. That year, they had a son, whom they sneaked through customs and back to Dubuque at the age of six days. "Then it was 1969," he said. "Senior year. That's when I was radicalized. I bailed on pre-seminary and got a teaching certificate." After graduating, amid the chaos of student protests, he and his new family returned to Germany, to Schiller College, where he worked as an instructor and became the dean of students. "I burned through the mythology of my youth. I replaced it with Heidegger, Goethe, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and then depth psychology—Jung."

A mid-century apostate explores the horizons of the mind and the sins of the flesh: by the mid-seventies, Tate was in Southern California, teaching psychology and personality theory at community colleges named Golden West and Orange Coast. "It became clear I wasn't one for the marriage," he said. "All I got out of the divorce was my 750 Yamaha and an electric-blue beanbag chair." (He's now close to his son.) Picture the apostate disembarking from the motorcycle, in a paisley shirt, a scarf, and tight pants tucked into high boots, and rolling into his human-sexuality class at Golden West. "Faculty guys took exception to me and my character, and my teaching style," he said. "I was into learning theory." A woman named Susan, who had been unhappily married to a Mennonite from Intercourse, Pennsylvania, began showing up to his hum-sex class.

Tate and Susan hit the road in his Datsun. They wound up, after some months, in Miles City, Montana, the home of Tate's older sister, where he'd spent his teen-age summers working on haying teams and combine crews. Susan worked as a waitress at a bar called the Hole in the Wall, and Tate got a job as a counsellor at the Pine Hills School for Boys, a state institution for hard-core juvenile delinquents. "The approach had been all Thorazine and nose-to-the-wall," Tate said. He was hired to try a more progressive regimen. "These were tough, tough kids. It was there that I lost any residue of naïveté about how dark the human psyche can go." The couple moved to Bozeman in 1982, and had a daughter. Susan got a job at a hair salon called A Head of Our Time, and Tate taught history and started his therapy practice.

In the early eighties, Tate fell in with a part-Crow, part-Sioux, part-white Montana man named Scott Frazier, who had had a near-death experience while working at an oil refinery in Billings, and who, not without some tribal resistance, had become a Sun Dance chief and opened the notoriously gruelling ceremony to outsiders. Tate participated in ten of these, each comprising three or four days of intense physical exertion, without food or water. At Frazier's urging, he found and retrieved four eagle carcasses in the wild, for the plumage. He also put himself through traditional high-country fasts—vision quests, of a kind. "When you sit by yourself for three days on a mountaintop with no food or water, shit goes down," he said. "All of the boundaries disappear.

"Whatever I'm into, I go deep," he went on. "But it became clear that it was becoming a little culty, and so I excused myself."

Tate also became involved in the nascent men's mythopoetic movement led by the poet Robert Bly. An article about Bly and the Grimms' coming-of-age fairy tale "Iron John" (which would become the title of Bly's 1990 best-seller) piqued Tate's interest, and he attended a Bly retreat on Lake Hubert, in Minnesota. "There were more than a hundred men there," he said. "It got pretty Western. At one point, they had set up maybe six sweat lodges. The guy who did it was way past his skill set, and at that time I was three years into my work with the Crow medicine man, and I intervened. I got it back on track." At the men's gatherings, you were expected to discover your animal totem. Tate's was a moose. Bly's was a bear. "I would do a moose strut, and then Bly and I would wrestle," he said.

"I love big men," Tate told me. "I'm a big guy. I like being around big guys. Big personalities, big stature. That's really why Conrad and I get along so well. I feel most comfortable with accomplished men who don't have huge egos."

That evening, we met up with Anker and the writer David Quammen for a drink. These three are among the regulars in informal meetings of Bozeman men who call themselves the Scotch Club: occasional well-oiled nights in backcountry cabins. Stories, verities, the shedding of masks. At this mini-session, as at other gatherings in town, I kept hearing references to regular people (that is, those who are not world-famous alpinists) who'd lost loved ones to climbing and skiing accidents; in this cohort, it seemed almost as common as cancer. Anker and Lowe-Anker, as the mahatmas of the mountain scene, seemed to have connections to all of them.

Anker is sandy-haired, strong-jawed, intense, and introverted; people in Montana have urged him to run for office, but he is certain that he is too thin-skinned. He grew up in central California, just outside Yosemite National Park, on land that had been in his father's family since the gold rush. His mother, from outside Dresden, met his father, a serviceman, in Germany, just after the war. Anker got his start as a climber on California granite, then gravitated toward the icy amplitude of the Himalayas, before becoming a pioneer of a new kind of challenge: high-altitude big walls. He made the first ascent, with Jimmy Chin and Renan Ozturk, in 2011, of Meru, a tower of rock and ice in India that Mugs Stump had attempted twice in the eighties. It became the basis for a documentary film. Anker has a knack for dramatic story lines. He first made a name for himself outside climbing circles in 1999, when he found the body of the early British alpinist George Mallory, not far from the summit of Mt. Everest, where he'd perished seventy-five years before. Anker, whether by fate or by his own design, was caught up in a cycle of disappearance and reappearance, of death and its aftermath.

Anker had inherited Alex Lowe's celebrity mantle in Bozeman. After drinks that evening, he took a curious route on the walk home, opting for back alleys instead of Main Street, slouch-darting along an archipelago of shadows. "Hungry eyes," he said. He explained that people around town often looked at him in a way that indicated they wanted his time or attention. Fame was part of the deal—he'd chosen it, as a high achiever and the well-compensated face of a sport and a big sporting-goods brand—but he was uncomfortable under the public's imploring gaze. He found greater ease at the planet's harsh, unpopulated extremes, in the company of another superhuman or two, whose hungry eyes were invariably trained upward. Happiness is a cold bivy sack. Recently, Anker met a fan

Anker, right, with Alex Lowe, two years before Lowe died in the Himalayas, in an avalanche that Anker survived.

GORDON WILTSIE

in an airport: “My hoodie’s up. I’m disappearing. And now here comes this guy, super hungry eyes, and so I talk to him. He’s, like, ‘I named my company Meru.’ He was your classic business dude, a bankruptcy guy. And then I was pissed.”

We went in the back door of his house: garden, garage, toys and tools, dogs. Lowe-Anker met us in the kitchen. She asked about our plan to spend the next night in the mountains above Hyalite Canyon. “Who’s going?” she asked me, in her mordant high-country drawl.

“Just Conrad, Tim, and me.”

“The poor sad men,” she said, with a mocking sigh. Lowe-Anker is sometimes reluctant to indulge the climbers in their sorrow. Later, she elaborated: “We have so many friends here, including young women whose husbands have died. Certainly, there are some women who are the ones who die, in this arena, but it’s mostly men. And there’s a lot of brokenhearted women and families left behind.” She cited a remark she’d heard decades ago that comes up all the time, in reference to mountaineering: “It’s not that different from young men going off to war. Women like me, it’s not new. How many women are there in war-torn areas who have lost their husbands and a raft of sons and family members?”

Anker said, “A fundamental difference, and why people are critical of this, is that we do this by our own volition, whereas if you’re a firefighter, a soldier, or a police person, you’re a hero, you did that on behalf of other people in society, or because you had to.”

Mountain climbing is a modern curiosity, a bourgeois indulgence. It consists mostly of relatively well-to-do white people manufacturing danger for themselves. Having been spared war, starvation, mass violence, and oppression, its practitioners travel great distances and endure great sacrifices to test their bodies and minds, encounter beauty, and experience the precariousness of existence and the terror and whatever revelations, fleeting or otherwise, may come of it. Though the whole enterprise may seem crazy or stupid or pointless, to many people it represents a necessary extreme of human endeavor, that combination of excellence and aberrance which propels a sliver of the population to set about going to the moon or writing symphonies, or dropping out entirely, as latter-day hermits and monks.

Each climbing season, there is a new tale to baffle the flatlanders. Last year, a climber named Daniele Nardi left behind a wife and their six-month-old son to make a fourth attempt on one of the most dangerous routes in the world, the Mummery Rib, on Nanga Parbat, in Pakistan. His partner, Tom Ballard, had lost his mother on K2. What a story the two men made: the obsessive and the undaunted son. Nardi and Ballard died, of course.

Max Lowe, who is thirty-one, is finishing a film about his family. “They aren’t so sure about the whole thing,” he told me recently. “They’re, like, ‘Why do you need to do this? Why do you need to stir up all this grief?’ Maybe I should’ve just gone to therapy.” Some people compare climbing to heroin: addictive, selfish, deadly. And yet, while society tends to condemn people who abandon their families for opiates and die of an overdose, we often treat fallen climbers, including Max’s father, as heroes. “It’s a lot to ask someone to give up something they love for you,” Max said.

"But if you can't expect your parents to give that up for you, what can you expect in this life?"

Anker had proposed a night of camping—three sad men, one small tent—at his go-to getaway in Hyalite Canyon. The Perch, as he called it, was a recurring location in his dreams, but it was also, I soon learned, a narrow ledge on a cliff, requiring some exposed scrambling on a rock face, which was well above my pay grade, and, besides, the forecast was calling for a blizzard and temperatures in the teens. "It's going to get nasty," Anker said, grinning.

"It's gonna get real Western," Tate said. Instead, we'd go to a cabin belonging to a family friend: a Scotch Club hang. On the second anniversary of the deaths of Kennedy and Perkins, with a truckload of provisions, we four-wheeled it to the cabin, which was in a clearing above a steep slope, with a view toward the snow-clad Hyalite peaks, including the one named for Alex Lowe, and one that, in a certain light, looked—to nobody but me—like the painted face of Gene Simmons.

We opened up the cabin, then drove to the end of the canyon and began hiking up a trail that wound through a conifer forest toward a band of cliffs. The men had a permit to harvest firewood, so we carried a couple of axes, and Anker had a chainsaw, which he soon revved up and sicced on branches, limbs, and trees, as we made our way uphill. Slightly hunched and a little duck-footed, in a hoodie and orange earmuffs, he stomped around and called out commands, amid a bedlam of sawdust and exhaust. On his orders, we carried the debris deeper into the woods. Tate worked hard to maintain his balance as he heaved boughs of spruce.

The trail led up to the most popular ice-climbing spot in the canyon, called Genesis, and though I'd begun to suspect that Anker had us throwing stuff around just for kicks, he explained that we were tidying up the trail in time for winter, to improve the hike up and the ski down. "This is how I climb mountains," he said. I'd always thought of ascending big peaks as a slow and methodical undertaking, but it occurred to me, watching him John Henry his way through these woods, that, if you were to adjust the frame-per-second dial, what climbers do is attack a mountain, as though to demolish it.

He attacked the rest of the evening this way: splitting wood, making a fire, rigging a tripod over the fire for the pot, cutting vegetables, cooking a stew, drinking beer, playing air guitar, crushing empty cans with the side of an axe. "I had A.D.H.D. as a kid," Anker said. "Hyper-situational awareness." His energy was palpable. Semiretirement didn't suit him at all, but hanging around a bonfire with a few dudes certainly did. The snow started to fall before midnight, and by morning there was half a foot on the ground.

A year before, the North Face had invited me to Puerto Rico to speak on a panel for the company's annual athletes' summit—not my bag, typically, but the roster of big-name mountaineers and skiers who'd be there promised that it would be a laid-back Chautauqua of mountain badassery that an old harness-sniffer like me couldn't resist. Some fifty athletes on the North Face team, plus a dozen or so marketing executives and support staff, took over a beach resort that had been closed since Hurricane Maria, a year before.

I arrived late the second night, after dinner. Most of the athletes were sitting around a bonfire on the beach. A theatrical white-haired gent was leading a storytelling session: Tim Tate. An extreme skier named Angel Collinson, from Utah, was telling a story about the death of her boyfriend in a skiing accident. Other tales followed. Tate's flamboyant Rolling Thunder demeanor, and the communal baring of souls amid a circle of fervent firelit faces, made me—stranger and city boy, fresh off the plane—feel ill at ease; I hadn't had what they were having.

Everyone was up at dawn. Yoga, jogging, surfing; a legation went inland to plant trees. The resort grounds were a bustle of hyperactive, impossibly hale young creatures on holiday. Climbers—the men shirtless, the women in bikini tops—rigged up ropes and slacklines and did pullups and bouldering maneuvers off the villas' eaves. Such lats, such tats. I kept my shirt on, and cracked a Medalla Light.

The panel that afternoon, featuring Tate, me, and a social-media guru, was on "storytelling." What did I know about the kind of storytelling that they were there to ponder—the framing of their adventures, which they refer to as projects, in such a way as to secure funding, attract an audience, and burnish a brand? It is the job of a professional adventure athlete to create media: films, photos, articles, social posts. You go out and perform amazing feats in amazing places while wearing the amazing gear. The framing and the depiction of these feats give them scale, reach, and meaning—and commercial viability.

"Climbing is not a quantifiable sport," Anker told me. "Usain Bolt was the fastest runner—we could measure that. Climbing is this sort of introvert-type activity that we do. It's experiential. Two people alone on a mountain. Or even just one. So how do you share that story?" In the early nineties, as a young marketing associate at the North Face, Anker had helped conceive of a climbing team, which was the first of its kind; as its founding captain, he brought in Lowe, among others. It was a loose affiliation, and there was no league, or even competition, at least of the measurable kind, but he and the others sought to cultivate a network of camaraderie and support. Later, the team expanded to include other extreme endeavors, in part because it was a skier, Scot Schmidt, whose exploits flying off cliffs in a black-and-yellow North Face Steep Tech suit juiced the retail sales that made such a generous system of sponsorship possible.

It's a strange business: the artifice of a film shoot combined with the real-as-real-can-be physical exertions and technical challenges of surviving in the mountains. Renan Ozturk told me, "Filming makes it more dangerous. It slows it down, and you're not quite as focussed. It taxes your body, complicates the logistics. It's also what you have to do on these trips if you want to get funded."

At that moment, the big hit was

"Free Solo," the documentary about Alex Honnold's ascent of El Capitan, in Yosemite, directed by Jimmy Chin and his wife, Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi. (Honnold and Chin are both North Face athletes. Neither was in Puerto Rico, since they were busy promoting the film's Oscar candidacy, telling the story about the story.) "Free Solo" is in large part about the emotional and ethical challenges of documenting what could well be the hero's gruesome demise. Jenni Lowe-Anker said, "Don't think for a minute that Conrad and Jimmy and all of us who know what Alex was doing weren't terrified he was going to die. It was kind of like, Shit, if he dies, everyone is going to be vilified."

The best athletes were pushing the threshold of what was possible, partly because the gear allowed them to, and partly because the gear manufacturers expected them to. "You're only as good as your next climb," I'd heard people say. "You can get insecure, because you're expendable," Mark Carter, the snowboarder, said. "People want my job."

Meanwhile, because of global warming, the mountains were changing. Ice was melting, and so conditions that had always been lethally unpredictable were becoming more so. Experience, both of the individual and the transmittable kind, isn't keeping pace. The beta, as climbers call accumulated information about a route, has a sell-by date.

The North Face does not offer its athletes health insurance or life insurance. The pay can range from substantial six-figure annual salaries for the stars (who have agents that typically handle the negotiations) to four-figure stipends, or even just free gear, for up-and-coming "ambassadors."

"The athletes would pursue these activities with or without us," Arne Arens, the president of the North Face, told me. "We know the inherent risks. We try to limit them as much as we can. They choose the objectives. Our role is to make it as safe as possible." Generally, the athletes develop their own projects and pitch them to the company, which in turn shapes them not only to market the brand but also to road test new technology and gear. "If it weren't for the athletes, we wouldn't be able to push the limits ourselves," Arens said.

At dusk, a thunderstorm swept in over the beach in Puerto Rico. Lightning struck a nearby headland, and the surfers panic-paddled to shore. Most of the athletes had gathered under the mess tent, the metal poles of which were anchored in what the storm had turned into an ankle-deep pool of rainwater. One bolt and we'd all be toast. Faces shone in the blue squall twilight. I talked to runners, rock climbers, snowboarders.

"Do you want to hear my story?" Jim Morrison asked. With his partner, Hilaree Nelson, Morrison had recently completed a long-coveted first descent on skis of Lhotse, the summit adjacent to Everest. He took me aside and solemnly told me about the deaths, in an airplane crash, of his wife and their two young children. The accident left him alone, completely gutted, considering suicide. The story he was telling, and pitching, was one of renewal: his partnership with Nelson; his life with Nelson's sons, who were with them in Puerto Rico; the triumph on Lhotse. I heard about other projects. An English climber named James Pearson was exploring *sawanobori*, the Japanese art of climbing up flowing streams and waterfalls. The Italian mountaineers Tamara Lunger and Simone Moro were planning a winter ascent of Pik Pobeda, in Siberia, reputed to be the coldest climb on earth. Jess Roskelley, of Spokane, and Hansjörg Auer, an Austrian, huddled to discuss some big icy rock walls, of the kind that Anker favored; a route in Canada had caught their eye. All of it seemed a long way from a beach in the Caribbean. As the night wore on, the climbers refilled their camping mugs with rum punch from a cooler, while the skiers and snowboarders twisted up joints on the porch of their villa. The ultra-runners mostly stuck to seltzer.

The main event that night was the passing of the team captaincy, from Anker to Hilaree Nelson. The athletes assembled under the tent and laughed and hooted along as a procession of them stood to toast and roast Anker. Lowe-Anker, at her first-ever athletes' summit, made a few remarks on the courage and forbearance of climbers' mates—the loved ones at home. Humbled and a little tongue-tied, Anker stood and introduced Tate, who, adopting a priestly stance, said, "Hilaree, come here. You stand here. Conrad here."

"This seems like it could be Catholic or something," Anker said. "But I think this is more pagan."

"The love I have for this man is as deep as I've ever experienced," Tate said. "We have a heart connection." A few weeks before, he said, he'd been on the Lowe-Anker family's ranch in Montana, building a jack fence with Anker and Max Lowe, and had floated the idea of "a ritual of transfer of power." Now he produced some ritual objects. "This belt I've suffered and worn in ten Crow Sun Dances. I've earned the right to be an elder. So know that. And this silk scarf comes to me from a women's collective in India." He described a traditional dancing troupe from India he'd got to know.

With the scarf, Tate bound together the wrists of Anker and Nelson, their mates looking on with some measure of bafflement at this quasi-matrimonial sacrament. A few people in the back got the giggles. "The energy in this room, and the love of these people, is the authority that this moment signifies," Tate's voice boomed. "This man is transferring the power to this woman. We honor them and bless them, and we wish you the best, Hilaree."

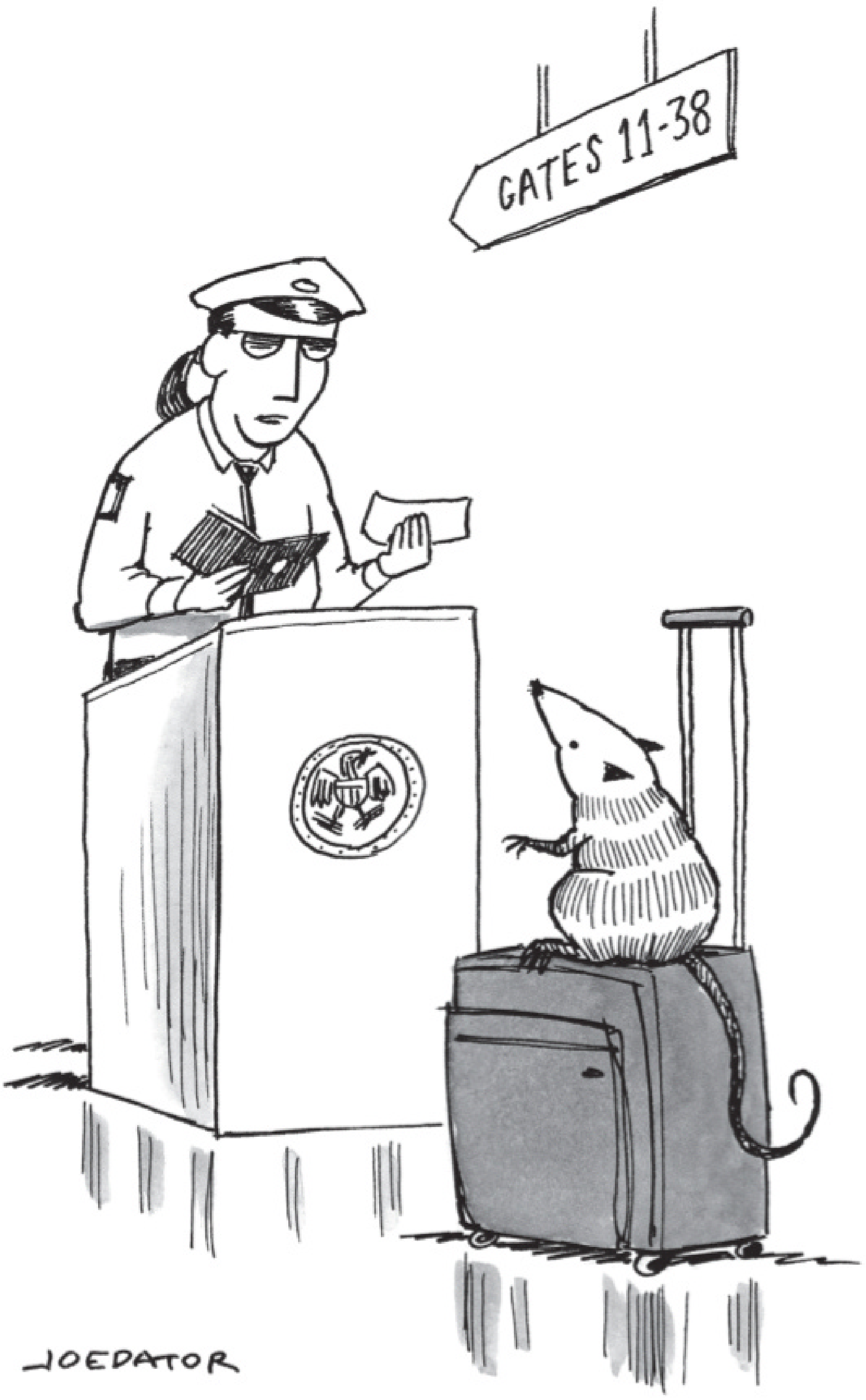
Confession: I was one of the gigglers. As a knee-jerk eye-roller, I was wary of Tate at first. The apparent hodgepodge of recycled folklore, cultural appropriation, performative grandeur, and Jungian bubble magic reminded me of some people I have chosen through the years to avoid. And yet before long I felt drawn to him—to his charisma, his sense of humor, his eagerness to listen, his over-the-topness. He'd been around. He had heft. He seemed to be tuned in to a cosmic thrum. "Within the first seconds of sizing each other up, you just know," Sam Elias, a climber, said. "He's the elder in the tribe who's modelling for the younger people in the tribe. He is proof that it'll be O.K. in thirty-plus years."

Although tropes like the hero's journey, or the pitfall of persona, did not seem immediately germane to my meek and cynical urban existence, they struck a note with this adventuresome, big-horizon crowd. The mountain people routinely and purposefully put themselves into states of extreme privation—exposure to the elements, and to gravity and chance. Days, even weeks, in a tent or a bivouac, the hours empty of all but numbing chores and the howling of the wind. Occasional, life-defining epics of survival or attainment, stumbling half blind through storms, all hope lost, along with some fingers and toes. Ecstatic or even numinous encounters at the edges of the earth. To such people, the Crow Sun Dance, or the ordeal of the vision quest, or Buddhist principles of nonattachment and transience might be more than metaphor. The hero's journey is a better description of a doom-hounded ordeal up and down a sacred peak in the Karakoram than of, say, a product rollout or a takeover war.

In the elements, performing tasks, the climbers achieve a narrowness of focus—a lizard-brain braid of adrenaline, expertise, and choice—that becomes a demented kind of meditation: Zen, on ice. Tate told me, "The challenge for each of them that I've met is how do you live a life of mountain sport and then return to your community and your relationships. It's a little like soldiering. The absence, when you go home, of that intensity, that danger, that high-stakes energy, that camaraderie." Back home, as high-country conquerors and lifestyle salespeople, the climbers tell their stories, over and over, until even they risk coming to believe in these versions of themselves. A guy like Tate, in spite of the affectations, helps them figure out who they might be.

Tate and Anker began pitching the idea of a "wellness initiative," a comprehensive approach to mental health, for the North Face team. But, by this past fall, the company was in the midst of some upheaval. It was moving its headquarters from the Bay Area to Denver, into the same building as its parent, the Vanity Fair Corporation, the owner of more than a dozen brands, including Timberland and Vans. More than half of the North Face's workforce wouldn't be making the move. The turnover and the transition gummed up whatever momentum there had been around the initiative. "For now, it's kind of bespoke," Arens told me. The new executives didn't know Tate, and the idea of building a company-wide program around a single character, especially one like Tate, with a practice based seven hundred miles from Denver, was not easily digestible to what one climber in Puerto Rico had half jestingly called "the corporate fucks."

"'Chaos' is too liberal or romantic a term, but there's some tension in the organization," Tate told me. The new global head of marketing had come



"Hold on—your boarding pass says 'possum,' but your passport says 'opossum.'"

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David Lama, shot by Jess Roskelley, just before the accident that killed them.

JESS ROSKELLEY / COURTESY ALLI ROSKELLEY

from Nike. "At Nike, nobody dies," one athlete said.

Still, some of the athletes said privately that they loved the idea of therapeutic conversation, but that Tate might not be their ideal psych. I talked to a couple of them who wondered if he was full of crap. (As for Lowe-Anker, Anker said, "She likes Tim, but she doesn't go in for all the woo-woo, which is what she calls it when people talk about chakras and yoga and all that.") But athletes kept asking to see him, and the North Face kept paying for them to do so. In 2020, it has allocated as much as ten per cent of its marketing budget for wellness. Anker said, "There's never an excuse for not doing the right thing."

A climber from Boulder, Madaleine Sorkin, had recently launched, with the American Alpine Club, an initiative called the Climbing Grief Fund, to support members of the climbing community dealing with the losses of friends and partners. "This is a heavy profession," she told me. "What is the responsibility of companies when their athletes don't return from a trip?" As with the North Face's wellness program, she isn't sure what shape the fund will take; it targets the climbing community generally, and not just the pros. On the Grief Fund's Web site, she has posted interviews with two dozen climbers, in which they talk about loss. Sorkin's wife, Henna Taylor, a filmmaker, is turning the footage into a documentary. Sorkin was a friend of Hayden Kennedy, and also of Brad Gobright, a highly regarded free soloist, in the Honnold mold, who died in November in a rappelling accident in Mexico—a samurai lets down his guard.

Last April, the North Face team suffered a grievous loss. Three of alpinism's brightest stars, two of whom I'd met in Puerto Rico, disappeared on Howse Peak, in the Canadian Rockies. Their bodies were eventually found at the base of a pitch called Life by the Drop. Postmortems suggested that, during their descent from the summit, an avalanche had swept them off the face. Jess Roskelley, Hansjörg Auer, David Lama: thirty-six, thirty-five, twenty-eight. The climbers had been testing a line of high-performance gear called the Advanced Mountain Kit. Five months later, two of them were posthumously awarded Piolets d'Or for outstanding first ascents the year before—Auer for a solo climb of Lupghar Sar, in Pakistan, and Lama for a solo climb of Lunag Ri, in the Himalayas.

As it happens, Lama and Anker had twice attempted to summit Lunag Ri together. The first time, in 2015, extreme cold turned them back not far from the top. A year later, they returned, but, six pitches up, Anker told Lama that he was feeling pain in his chest. Lama persuaded Anker to retreat and, over Anker's objections, to use a satellite phone to call in a helicopter rescue. Nine hours later, in a Kathmandu hospital, Anker learned that he'd had a heart attack. You could say, and Anker does, that Lama saved his life. Lama, who'd stayed behind at the base of the mountain, decided to go back up. He got just past the point they'd reached the previous year but again had to turn back. Two years later, Lama returned to Lunag Ri alone—climbers are often bewitched by unfinished projects—and finally got it done. "I would have loved to share this moment with Conrad," Lama wrote, in his account of the climb for the *American Alpine Journal*. He died on Howse Peak just days before the article went to press.

Anker, whose heart problems had forced him to give up his high-altitude-climbing career, got the news while on a lecture tour in the U.K. He'd been following the climbers' progress. He told me, "From the moment Joyce Roskelley's name came up on my phone to when I put it up to my ear, I thought, I know exactly what this is." Anker had brought Jess Roskelley and Lama onto the team. (They were born into the guild, in a way. Lama's mother, an Austrian climber, had met his father, a Nepali guide, on an expedition. Roskelley's father was the decorated mountaineer John Roskelley; they'd summited Everest together in 2003, when Jess was twenty.) A week later, Anker appeared as a guest on a podcast called "Terra Incognita." His feelings were still raw. "I've seen far too much of this," he said softly, in his flinty, diffident way. "We celebrate the mountains, because they create this wonderful connection between people. . . . But, when you run up against what just happened, you have to question whether it's really worth it."

As the families, the team, and the climbing community all tried to process the loss, the North Face, with Tate as a kind of chaplain, sought to honor the dead and to provide succor and support to the living. For an overnight memorial at a campground in the redwoods near Santa Cruz, it flew in some of the climbers' family members and several of the company's executives, including Arens, and everyone gathered around a bonfire for a boozy, improvised wake. Anker persuaded an opera singer who was staying at a nearby winery to come sing something, to get people's attention. Then he said, "And now Gandalf will say a few words." Anker threw a staff to Tate, who stamped the ground with it twice.

"You don't want me to stamp it a third time," Tate said. And then he began to talk. As he recalled later, "I went into a riff on the nature of invisible reality." When he was done, he sat down next to Jimmy Chin. "Deep," Chin said.

Tate also ministered to the families. He presided over Jess Roskelley's service in Spokane. "Jess had no will," his sister Jordan told me. "He had nothing written down. We had to guess. A pastor wasn't appropriate. So that's where Tim came in. He just has this way about him. It feels like he's looking into your soul. He really understands the world these boys were in."

The company wrestled with how best to do right by the climbers, without tilting into morbidity. Death and life style are at odds in the marketplace. As Madaleine Sorkin told me, "There's a stop point where the companies don't want to be talking about those climbers anymore." Some companies, such as Clif Bar, decided to pull back from the business of sponsoring climbers, in large part because of the moral hazard of financing risk. Fine, but that also deprives climbers of a source of income and support.

After Santa Cruz and Spokane, the Roskelleys went to Austria to meet the families of the other climbers and attend their memorials. (The North Face handled the costs and the logistics of their travel, as well as the repatriation of the bodies.) The company sent Tate along, too, and he went for long walks in the foothills of the Alps with Auer's mother. In September, Anker and John Roskelley flew to Poland for the Piolet d'Or ceremony. (John Roskelley presented the results of his investigation into the accident on Howse Peak.) Anker accepted the award on Lama's behalf, alongside his parents. They stood onstage, all of them in tears, as an audience of some two thousand people applauded Lama for several minutes.

By the time Anker was in Poland, he had been experiencing some misgivings about his leadership role in the climbing community and at the North Face. His mother had died. His heart was unwell. His best days as a climber were behind him, and yet he was prone to restlessness at home. He'd been battling bouts of depression and self-recrimination.

"Conrad is coming to a head in his life," Max Lowe told me. "He's lived a long life in this world where a lot don't. Most of his friends are dead. I think he also feels responsible as an Old Guard guy who introduced a lot of them to climbing. Aging and the heart attack have kept him back from the mountains. Which is harder in a way than just dying in the mountains and being deified. Dying in the mountains is easier than having to live and watch your peers and friends die and having to face your own mortality and give up living on that beautiful edge."

"Alex died a hero," Anker said. "There was no old age. Just a short bit of physical pain and then you're getting carbon-recycled again." With me, he was relatively circumspect about his own struggles. Tate, he said, had helped him identify "the difference between my character and my persona—what masquerade is, and how the root of that is 'mask' and 'masculine.'"

The day after Christmas, Anker travelled to Antarctica for a month of climbing on and around the Vinson Massif, the continent's highest point. For the first time since the early two-thousands, he was working as a guide. His client was a hedge-fund manager and an outdoor enthusiast, with nine companions, who were spending forty-five thousand dollars a head. All but two of them made the summit. Then Anker joined up with his North Face teammates Chin, Morrison, and Nelson, for a quick jaunt up Vinson, followed by an attempt on a nearby peak called Tyree, which had a sublimely steep and technical face for Chin, Morrison, and Nelson to attempt on skis. The weather didn't coöperate; Antarctica, likely because of climate change, has become more humid. The face was loaded with deep snow, the cold was brutal, and everyone had kids back home. "It just wasn't worth it," Anker said the other day. "We turned around." It wasn't yet clear what story their film of the trip would tell, and how it might help the North Face, but Anker had cherished his eight days holed up in a tent with Chin. "Each of us has his side—it's always the same. We have a routine," he said.

Sam Elias had shared a tent with Anker on Everest in 2012. He remembers Anker, seemingly spent, powering up alone to the summit like a zombie, driven by a force he couldn't quite fathom. "That expedition destroyed my life for a number of years," Elias told me. "Feeling so close to death and then not dying and stepping back into the world." Elias, who is thirty-seven, is from Detroit, the son of a Syrian immigrant and a Pole; he came late to climbing and mountain culture. He'd been working with Tate since Puerto Rico, and did an intensive in Bozeman in December. He said recently, over the phone, "You go into the mountains, and your friend dies and you don't, and that's O.K.—it doesn't have to fuck up your life for years." He went on, "Maybe I'm deluded or haven't lost the right person, or enough people, but I just have a different view. I've always felt strange about death. I've never been personally that troubled by it. I haven't gone through what Michael and Julie Kennedy have, or the girlfriends of my friends, or what Conrad has. Hayden was a really close friend of mine. I was living in Carbondale when he was in high school. I watched him—" And then Elias began to sob. ♦

PROFILES

GET OUT

Stephen Miller says he's following Trump's orders on immigration. But who's really in charge?

BY JONATHAN BLITZER

One afternoon in November, a half-dozen government officials sat at a conference table in the White House, waiting for the arrival of Stephen Miller, a senior adviser to Donald Trump. Miller had summoned officials from the Departments of Homeland Security, State, and Justice to discuss a new Administration policy initiative: a series of agreements with the governments of Central America that would force asylum seekers to apply for protection in that region instead of in the United States. Miller, who had helped make the deals, wanted to know when their provisions could go into effect. Typically, everyone rises when top White House officials enter a room. But when Miller walked in, wearing a dark suit and an expression of wry resolve, everyone remained seated, their eyes cast down. "You go into meetings with Miller and try to get out with as little damage as possible," a former Administration official told me. Miller has a habit of berating officials, especially lower-ranking ones, for an agency's perceived failures. Chad Wolf, now the acting head of D.H.S., used to advise colleagues to placate Miller by picking one item from his long list of demands, and vowing to execute it. "It's a war of attrition," Wolf told them. "Maybe he forgets the rest for a while, and you buy yourself some time."

One participant in the November meeting pointed out that El Salvador didn't have a functioning asylum system. "They don't need a system," Miller interrupted. He began speaking over people, asking questions, then cutting off the answers.

As the meeting ended, Miller held up his hand to make a final comment. "I didn't mean to come across as harsh," he said. His voice dropped. "It's just that this is all I care about. I don't have a family. I don't have anything else. This is my life."

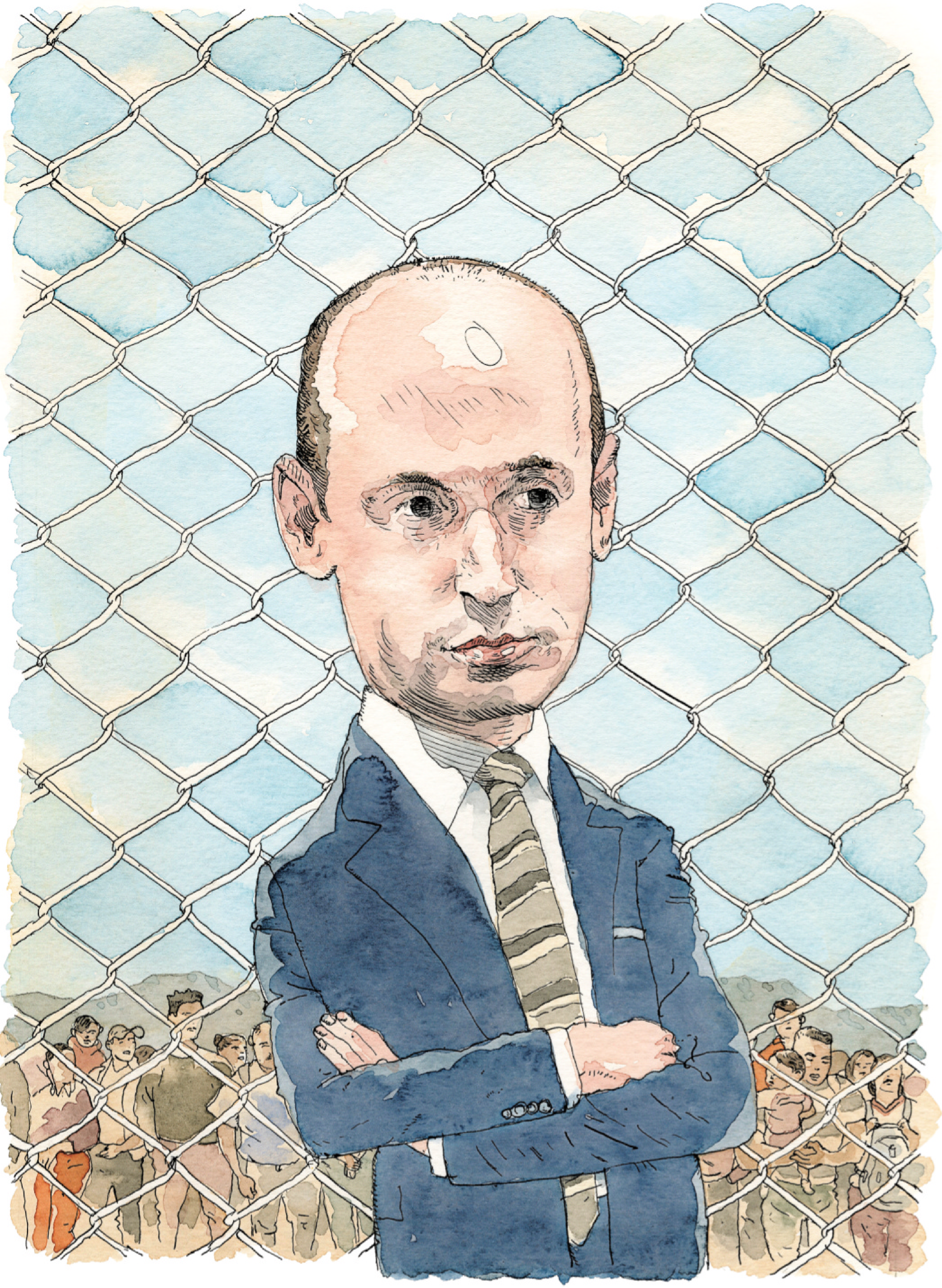
Miller, who is thirty-four, with thinning hair and a sharp, narrow face, is an anomaly in Washington: an adviser with total authority over a single issue that has come to define an entire Administration. "We have never had a President who ran, and won, on immigration," Muzaffar Chishti, of the Migration Policy Institute, told me. "And he's kept his promise on immigration." Miller, who was a speechwriter during the campaign, is now Trump's longest-serving senior aide. He is also an Internet meme, a public scourge, and a catch-all symbol of the racism and malice of the current government. In a cast of exceptionally polarizing officials, he has embraced the role of archvillain. Miller can be found shouting over interviewers on the weekend news shows or berating reporters in the White House briefing room; he has also vowed to quell a "deep state" conspiracy against Trump. When he's not accusing journalists of harboring a "cosmopolitan bias" or denying that the Statue of Liberty symbolizes America's identity as a nation of immigrants, he is shaping policy and provoking the President's most combative impulses.

Jeh Johnson, who headed the Department of Homeland Security under Barack Obama, told me, "D.H.S. was born of bipartisan parents in Congress, in the aftermath of 9/11, when there was support for a large Cabinet-level department to consolidate control of all the different ways someone can enter this country." D.H.S. is the third-largest federal department, with a fifty-billion-dollar budget and a staff of some two hundred thousand employees, spanning the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. From its founding, in 2002, to the end of Obama's Presidency, the department had five secretaries; under Trump, it has had five more. "Immigration is overheated and over-politicized, and it has overwhelmed D.H.S.," Johnson said.

"The massive changes Miller engineered in border and immigration policy required that the policymaking process at D.H.S. be ignored," Alan Bersin, a former senior department official, told me. "Who do you think has filled the vacuum?" Miller has cultivated lower-level officials in the department who answer directly to him, providing information, policy updates, and data, often behind the backs of their bosses. "At the beginning of 2017, none of us could have foreseen that he would wield this kind of power," a former Trump Administration official told me. Of thirty current and former officials I interviewed, not one could recall a White House adviser as relentless as Miller, or as successful in imposing his will across agencies. These officials resented him as an upstart and mocked his affectations—his "arrogant monotonal voice" and tin-eared bombast—but few were comfortable going on the record, even after leaving the government. Miller is famously vindictive, and, as Trump runs for a second term, he is sure to grow only more powerful. "Miller doesn't have to get Trump to believe everything he does," one of the officials told me. "He just has to get Trump to say it all."

When Miller and I spoke by phone, it was off the record. Without an audience, he gave the same message at half the volume—a litany of talking points about all the ways in which the President had delivered on his campaign promises. Afterward, the White House sent me a quote for attribution: "It is the single greatest honor of my life to work for President Trump and to support his incredible agenda."

Miller's obsession with restricting immigration and punishing immigrants has become the defining characteristic of the Trump White House, to the extent that campaigning and governing



Miller's obsession with restricting immigration and punishing immigrants has come to define Trump's Administration.

ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BLITT

on the issue are no longer distinguishable. In the past three and a half years, the Trump Administration has dismantled immigration policies and precedents that took shape in the course of decades, using current laws to intensify enforcement against illegal immigration and pursuing new ones to reduce legal immigration. Trump has slashed the refugee program; virtually ended asylum at the southern border; and written a rule denying green cards to families who might receive public benefits. Miller has choreographed these initiatives, convincing Trump that his political future depends on them—and on going even further. If Trump is not reëlected, Miller will never again have such power. A D.H.S. official told me, "Going into 2020, Miller is at a crossroads."

The radicalism of Miller's views tends to obscure how much he has evolved as a tactician since he arrived in Washington. He grew up in Santa Monica, California, the son of Jewish Democrats, but, by the time he entered high school, he had become a strident conservative. "He was going to a very liberal, diverse school," Megan Healey, one of his classmates, told me. "In a school where the nerds were considered cool, he was still the guy that nobody liked." The terrorist attacks of 9/11 took place when he was a junior, cementing his persona. "Anti-Americanism had spread all over the school like a rash," he later wrote. "Osama Bin Laden would feel very welcome at Santa Monica High School." At Duke, where he studied political science and wrote a column for the student newspaper, he became a familiar presence on conservative television and radio programs. His hostility toward immigrants formed part of his politics, but did not stand out. He opposed left-wing bias in the classroom, invited controversial speakers to campus, and organized "Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week." "America without her culture is like a body without a soul," he wrote in one column. "Yet many of today's youth see America as nothing but a meeting point for the cultures of other nations." His most notable cause was to defend a group of white lacrosse players who had been falsely accused of raping a black woman who was stripping at a party. The editor of his column later told *The Atlantic*, "He picked the most contrarian of stances to articulate, wrote the most hyperbolic prose he could . . . then sat back and waited for people's reactions."

After graduation, in 2008, he was offered a job as press secretary for Michele Bachmann, a Republican representative from Minnesota, who gained national attention after an undocumented immigrant near her district crashed her car into a school bus, killing four children. Miller pushed Bachmann to go on television. On Fox News, she described the tragedy as an example of "anarchy versus the rule of law," and, in a later campaign stop, blamed immigrants for "bringing in diseases, bringing in drugs, bringing in violence." The following fall, after Bachmann was reëlected, Miller left his post, and took a communications job in the office of Jeff Sessions, of Alabama, then the Senate's staunchest opponent of immigration.

Sessions and Miller approached immigration from different perspectives. During the nineties and early two-thousands, immigration had quadrupled in Alabama, and Sessions, a resolute populist, grew alarmed at the state's increasingly foreign workforce. Miller's concerns tended to be more cultural and inflammatory—he raised questions about the ability of Latin Americans to learn English and of Islam's compatibility with American norms.

Sessions introduced Miller to such think tanks as NumbersUSA and the Center for Immigration Studies, which produced data-laden reports on the societal costs of immigration. Soon Miller was attending weekly meetings at the Heritage Foundation, the conservative-policy institute, with a small group of congressional staff. "He'd arrive with these policy notions he'd just conjure up," a participant told me. "He came across as super smart, but super right wing." To most Republican staffers, he was known for his mass e-mails about immigration, full of links to articles from fringe Web sites. "I just started deleting them when I'd see his name," a senior Republican staffer told me. "Everyone did."

Mitt Romney ran for President, in 2012, on a platform that included a commitment to reducing illegal immigration. He argued that, if the federal government made life harder for undocumented immigrants by limiting their employment opportunities, large numbers would "self-deport." After Romney lost, the Republican National Committee commissioned an emergency report on the future of the Party, in which pollsters and elected officials concluded that Republican candidates had moved too far right. The report warned that if the Party did not "embrace and champion comprehensive immigration reform" its appeal would "continue to shrink to its core constituencies." On the night of Obama's second Inauguration, in January, 2013, his former chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, whose reluctance to tackle the issue of immigration—the "third rail of American politics," he called it—was well known inside the Administration, told White House officials that now "even a blind person" could steer a comprehensive reform bill through Congress.

In the spring of 2013, a bipartisan group of senators known as the Gang of Eight—which included the Republicans Marco Rubio, John McCain, and Lindsey Graham—proposed a bill that would have made changes to the immigration system while creating a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented people. The legislation was widely embraced in the Senate, but it was premised on a compromise that repulsed Sessions: legalization in exchange for increased border-security measures. Or, as he saw it, amnesty for nothing.

At meetings throughout the spring and summer of 2013, Republican staffers debated the terms of a possible bill. When Miller was allowed to sit in, he took notes and asked questions about esoteric provisions. Sessions was one of a half-dozen senators who weren't expected to vote for a bill in any form; Miller was there to "take the information, punch it up, and make it into an attack," according to a senior Republican Senate aide. "It was sending a signal to Senate Republicans to stay away from the bill, or to give them heartburn over it. And it was a kind of Bat-Signal to the House Republicans."

Steve Bannon, then the head of Breitbart News, compared the work that Sessions and Miller were doing to stop the bill to "the civil-rights movement in the nineteen-sixties," and he began communicating regularly with Miller, who sent the Web site ideas and details for immigration stories. The far-right press characterized a provision introduced by Rubio to distribute cell phones in border areas, so that residents could report border crossings, as a measure to give "amnesty phones" to migrants; a pathway to citizenship would end in "benefits to line-jumping illegal aliens." Miller took reporters' calls late into the night, making himself indispensable to anyone covering the policy fight in Washington. "As a staffer, serving his boss, he was excellent," Julia Preston, a former correspondent for the *Times*, told me. She spoke to Miller regularly. "This stuff is emotional for him." In a conversation about H1-B visas, "he was talking so passionately that he actually wept."

Opponents of the bill began to feel more confident. "Miller played a pretty substantial role" in "bruising" the legislation, the senior Senate aide said. A crisis was developing at the southern border, where tens of thousands of unaccompanied children, as well as families from Central America, were arriving in search of asylum. The Obama Administration tried to downplay the situation, but the crisis coincided with the Republican primary campaigns, in which populist Tea Party members were challenging members of the G.O.P. establishment. On June 10th, the day before Republican staffers in the House were scheduled to present a version of the bill to the Party leadership, the second-highest-ranking Republican in the House, Eric Cantor, of Virginia, lost his primary to Dave Brat, an academic and a political neophyte, who had run to the right of Cantor on immigration. "That's really when the bottom started falling out," Cecilia Muñoz, who worked at the White House at the time, told me. The immigration bill had already passed the Senate, but the Speaker of the House, a Republican, never brought it to the floor for a vote.

Miller "got a master's degree in immigration policy during that process," one of the Republican aides who worked with him at the time told me. "Before that, he didn't have any policy experience at all. It was all communications. In 2013, he learned where all the bodies were buried." Miller studied decades' worth of immigration regulations, rules, and discretionary judgments, which were designed to guide and temper enforcement. He objected to the reluctance of establishment politicians to strictly interpret the existing laws. "He'd say, 'It's easy to simply execute the law as it's written,'" a former colleague of his told me. "That's actually when he would make his most impressive arguments. Fact-based, legal arguments. He used to say, 'There's a lot of bureaucratic procedure imposed on the law. Why do we need to concern ourselves with all the extra stuff?'"

Miller pointed out the many loopholes in immigration laws, especially the widespread practice of "catch and release," in which large numbers of migrants were allowed to remain in the U.S. while they waited for their cases to be heard by immigration judges. Sessions had proposed amendments to end the policy, but they failed to gain support among Republicans. "Miller's response was 'The laws need to change,'" the aide said. "He was unimpressed by the promises of more border-patrol agents, or a trillion dollars for a virtual wall. People were taking advantage of the laws, not just of a porous border."

In January, 2015, when Republicans took control of the Senate, Miller and Sessions published a rebuttal to the Party's 2012 postmortem, called "Immigration Handbook for the New Republican Majority." They wrote, "On no issue is there a greater separation between the everyday citizen and the political elite than on the issue of immigration."

Five months later, Trump declared his candidacy, and, in January, 2016, Miller took a leave from Sessions's office to join the campaign. Sessions, who considered Trump an ally on immigration, had doubts about his electability, but in February Bannon convinced him that Trump could win. Sessions became the first senator to endorse him. Bannon, who was advising Trump, had also persuaded Corey Lewandowski, Trump's main handler, to promote Miller to the position of speechwriter. "You just can't wing it. Immigration is too important," he recalled saying. "You need policy people on this."

Trump's candidacy felt more like a low-grade insurgency than like a professional operation. The campaign rallies, with their ecstatic crowds, emboldened Miller, who often served as a warmup act for Trump. Pacing the stage with a relaxed smile, he resembled an insult comic, leading chants of "Build the wall." He'd flash a peace sign, and make way for Trump, who would recite a list of

"He really embodies the soul of mid-level management blues."

crimes committed by undocumented immigrants. Then, growing sombre, he'd invite the parents of a victim onstage to offer his condolences.

In August, 2016, at a rally in Phoenix, Trump delivered a policy speech on immigration, written by Miller. It was typically raucous and aggressive, full of racist fearmongering, but it also contained a detailed blueprint. "Our immigration system is worse than anyone realizes," Trump began. "Countless Americans who have died in recent years would be alive today if not for the open-border policies of this Administration." A ten-point list of desired policies followed: among them were an "end to catch and release," "zero tolerance for criminal aliens," penalties for sanctuary cities, a vow to reverse Obama's executive orders, and a "big-picture" vision for reforming the immigration system "to serve the best interests of America and its workers." Miller told the Washington *Post* that it was "as though everything that I felt at the deepest levels of my heart were now being expressed by a candidate for our nation's highest office."

Government and congressional staffers who supported immigration restrictions were impressed by Trump's speech. One official, who joined a group of immigration advisers to the campaign, told me, "I didn't like the candidate very much, but he's saying the right things about enforcing the law." Members of the group went on to join the transition team and later staff the government. "Filling those immigration jobs in the Administration was the top obsession. It was a shock-and-awe thing," the official said. "The fantasy was that there'd be a table full of executive orders that Trump would sign and then walk away. There would be thirty things happening on Day One, within an hour, and there wouldn't be enough lawyers to handle all the litigation. They wouldn't even know who to sue."

After Trump won the election, "Miller didn't even flirt with an agency or nomination position," a White House official told me. "He wanted to know what White House adviser position had the most say on immigration." He asked to head the Domestic Policy Council, an influential but amorphous group inside the White House. The position gave him proximity to the President and insulation from congressional scrutiny; he would issue, rather than implement, orders. "The rest of us have to testify before Congress. That's a check. If you're going to have your ass hauled before Congress, you're not going to feel comfortable breaking the law," a former top Administration official told me. "Miller will never have to testify for anything."

Immigration restrictionists have had a foothold in Congress for decades, but they haven't had access to the White House in a century. Even among the ideologues, Miller's approach was distinct. In his view, the more controversial the Administration's immigration policies were, the more easily it could divide and conquer the electorate. He had scared Republican House leaders in 2013 by caricaturing Democrats and moderate Republicans as advocates for "open borders"; now he aimed to send the same message from the White House. One of the measures contemplated by the President's immigration-advisory group was an order to block travellers from several Muslim-majority countries from entering the U.S. The group had been preparing the ban so that it would survive legal challenges, but Miller intervened. "Miller has two impulses that he's warring with," another senior Republican aide told me. "One is to be the bomb-thrower he always was. The other is to try to secure victories for the President." In the days leading up to Trump's Inauguration, Miller and a close associate named Gene Hamilton, another former Sessions staffer in his mid-thirties, drafted an executive order called "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States"—the travel ban.

When Trump signed it, none of the top officials at the Department of Homeland Security, which was in charge of enforcing the ban, had been notified in advance. Travellers with valid visas were suddenly trapped at American airports, unable to enter the country; refugees who, after years of waiting, had been vetted and approved for entry were turned back. Thousands of protesters and civil-rights attorneys began congregating at airports across the country, and Senators Graham and McCain

"You might have time left for one more book, but only if it doesn't require a lot of research."

issued a statement saying that "we should not turn our backs on those refugees who . . . pose no demonstrable threat to our nation, and who have suffered unspeakable horrors." Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law and senior adviser, was enraged. The next day, when the President's senior staff assembled in the Situation Room, Miller told John Kelly, the head of D.H.S.; Tom Bossert, the President's homeland-security adviser; and officials from the State Department, "This is the new world order. You need to get on board," according to an account in "Border Wars," by Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael D. Shear.

The ban was immediately challenged in federal court; it took eighteen months, and three versions of the order, before it passed legal muster. Instead of censuring Miller, Trump blamed the courts and lawyers at the Justice Department, including Sessions, who was now his Attorney General, for "watering down" the order.

Miller wasn't so much channelling Trump as overtaking him. Inside the White House, he was known as a "walking encyclopedia" on immigration, and the President's political advisers, who acknowledged that campaigning on the issue had been the key to Trump's victory in 2016, deferred to him as an expert. Those with reservations—like Rex Tillerson, the Secretary of State, and H. R. McMaster, the national-security adviser—had other responsibilities. Miller could outmaneuver them if he used the right interagency channels. He sent e-mail sparingly and avoided calling officials directly to issue orders, relaying his messages through intermediaries.

Since Trump could rarely comprehend the full substance of his own Administration's agenda on immigration, it fell to Miller to define what victory looked like. One of the President's favorite routines, according to someone close to both of them, is to play the good cop to Miller's bad cop: "He'll smile and say, 'Well, that sounds O.K. to me but, Stephen, I know you'd never go for it.'"

Miller invoked the President constantly, especially when he encountered resistance from other officials. One of them told me, "Someone would say to him, 'Stephen, what you're trying to do is not possible.' And his response would be 'It is possible. I spoke to the President an hour ago, and he said it had to be done.'" (Hogan Gidley, a White House spokesperson, told me, "The policies Stephen works on are not his own but, instead, a faithful and vigilant implementation of the agenda Donald Trump brilliantly laid out.")

For the first seven months of his Presidency, Trump vacillated about cancelling Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a highly popular program that Obama had instituted through executive action. DACA protected from deportation some seven hundred thousand people who had come to the U.S. as children. Trump had campaigned against it, then reversed himself. Miller was viscerally hostile to DACA. In an e-mail to a Breitbart editor, he said that expanding the "foreign-born share" of the U.S. workforce was an instance of "immigration" being used "to replace existing demographics." In September, 2017, under pressure from Miller and other White House advisers, Trump agreed to cancel DACA, setting a six-month deadline for Congress to find a legislative solution. The fight that ensued led to a brief government shutdown. Republicans refused to grant any form of "amnesty" unless they could get something significant in return, but, given Trump's inconsistency on DACA, the Party leadership couldn't gauge what he wanted from the negotiations.

Mostly, Trump cared about building a wall along the southern border. For Miller, the main goal of negotiations was to reduce the number of legal immigrants, which was not something that Congress had previously been willing to contemplate. But, with DACA recipients as a bargaining chip, the circumstances were different. "Miller knew the window was closing, that his only chance to force his agenda was if DACA kids were on the line," a Republican aide who worked closely with Miller told me.

On January 11, 2018, Trump summoned Dick Durbin, a Democratic senator from Illinois, and Lindsey Graham, from South Carolina, to the White House so that they could explain the terms of a bipartisan deal they'd reached. It would offer a path to citizenship for DACA recipients in exchange for increased border security and enforcement measures. The President told the senators that he was ready to back their plan. But, two hours later, when they entered the Oval Office, they found that they were not alone. Miller had invited a group of far-right Republicans—including Tom Cotton and David Perdue, the sponsors of a bill to cut legal immigration in half—to join them. The "fix is in," Durbin told an aide. When Graham brought up Haitian immigrants, while explaining an aspect of the agreement, Trump asked, "Why would we want all these people from shithole countries?" He now refused to endorse the deal he had supported that morning.

In the weeks that followed, whenever Trump responded positively to an overture by Democrats, Miller interceded. "Whoever has access to the President last—that's what sticks," a White House official told me. "Miller always made sure he was that person." Graham said, "As long as Stephen Miller is in charge of negotiating immigration, we're going nowhere."

The images first began appearing on Fox News in early April, 2018: a thousand migrants from Honduras, most of them travelling with their families, massing at the border between Guatemala and Mexico before heading north toward the United States. Trump regularly updated his Twitter feed as the group advanced into southern Mexico, more than a thousand miles from the U.S. He renewed calls for a border wall, attacked Mexico for failing to do more, and excoriated Democrats for "ridiculous liberal laws like catch and release." In the first year of his Presidency, border crossings were down, owing in part to what analysts called "the Trump Effect," as migrants and smugglers paused to consider whether Trump's actions toward migrants would match his rhetoric. But by May, 2018, there were roughly fifty thousand apprehensions a month at the border, double the number when he took

ZUCCHINI

My grandmother cored them
with a serrated knife

with her hands that had come
through the slaughter—

So many hours I stared at the blotch
marks on her knuckles,

her strong fingers around the
long green gourd—

In a glass bowl the stuffing was setting—
chopped lamb, tomato pulp, raw rice, lemon juice,

a sand brew of spices—
from the riverbank of her birth—

Can holding on to this image
help me make sense of time?

office. Though the increase was largely due to instability in Central America, the White House blamed Kirstjen Nielsen, who had taken over D.H.S. the previous December, after John Kelly became Trump's chief of staff. At a Cabinet meeting, on May 9th, Kelly focussed the discussion on immigration policy. By then, the President was calling Nielsen five times a day to complain. At the meeting, he berated her for half an hour. "How is this still happening?" Trump demanded. "Why don't you have solutions?"

Miller had ideas of his own. In 2013, during the unaccompanied-minors crisis, an official at ICE had suggested separating parents and children once they reached the border, in the hope of deterring other families from travelling north. The White House had dismissed the proposal as inhumane, but Miller took it up again. "He was obsessed with the idea of consequences," a top D.H.S. official who worked with Miller at the time told me. "He'd always say to us, 'They are breaking the law, and the only way we'll change that is if there's a consequence.'" The consequences were specific. The official said, "Miller made clear to us that, if you start to treat children badly enough, you'll be able to convince other parents to stop trying to come with theirs." Miller had already led a meeting at the White House to pressure D.O.J. officials to prosecute border crossers as criminals. (Doing so was the basis for separating families: while parents faced criminal charges, their children were treated as unaccompanied minors.) In April, he and Hamilton wrote a Presidential memorandum directing agencies to end catch and release; they also composed a letter, signed by Attorney General Sessions, articulating a policy, called zero tolerance, for prosecuting all adults who were arrested by D.H.S. for illegal entry.

Sessions announced the new policy at a gathering of law-enforcement officials in Arizona, saying that if parents were caught "smuggling" their children into the country they'd be separated from them and treated as criminals. The head of Customs and Border Protection, Kevin McAleenan, and the head of ICE, Tom Homan, signed off on zero tolerance, as did Nielsen. Miller, however, forced the policy into action before D.H.S. was ready to implement it. When border agents began separating families, the Administration hadn't yet made plans to reunite them, a direct result of "the pressure he brought to bear," a top D.H.S. official said. By late June, more than twenty-five hundred children, including a hundred and two under the age of five, had been separated from their parents, many of whom didn't know where the government had taken them. In an ICE detention center in El Paso, groups of separated mothers secretly exchanged information in the cafeteria to compile lists of their missing children and smuggle out requests to local lawyers for help.

Hundreds of parents were deported without their children. From Central America, they called intermittently functioning U.S. hotlines, set up by the Department of Health and Human Services, in an effort to locate them.

Miller forcefully defended family separation, telling the *Times* that voters would support the White House "90-10." In fact, the public was outraged, especially after a recording of small children crying for their parents at a Texas detention center was leaked to ProPublica. A Border Patrol agent could be heard saying derisively, "Here we have an orchestra." The policy dominated television news, and Ivanka and Melania Trump lobbied the President to end it. Some inside the Administration thought that the policy was justified, but that its execution had been poor. Several officials blamed Miller. "How many things have fallen because of bad messaging?" a D.H.S. agency head said to me. "Isn't Miller supposed to be the master of messaging?" On June 18th, officials at the White House decided to explain the Administration's position to the public in a press conference. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the President's chief spokesperson, pressured Nielsen to deliver the briefing, as a means of shielding the White House from blame. Nielsen's advisers were uniformly opposed. "She would become the face of the policy," one of them told me. But, according to an official who was present for the conversation, Sanders told Nielsen, "The President is getting killed on this, and it's your department. How are you not going to go out there?"

At the press conference, Nielsen alternated between denying that the government had created a policy to separate children from their parents and defending zero tolerance as a necessary

the temporal waves,
waves smashing and lipping

the pulverized stone; a bird dissolving
into a cloud bank in late day;

the happy and sad steps we walked

along the plaster walls and steel bridges,
the glass façades, highways of glistening money

the objects we caress in dreams
from which we wake to find the hallway dark,

the small light at the bottom of the stairs,
the kitchen waiting with a scent

of zucchini sautéed in olive oil
onions and oregano,

a waft of last night's red wine—a gulp
of cold water to bring on the day.

—*Peter Balakian*

measure for enforcing immigration laws. Forty-eight hours later, Trump ended the separation policy, blaming Nielsen for his political defeat. "I have no idea how Miller managed to escape this one," the official told me. "He knows just how and when to disappear."

As Trump has consolidated his control over the Republican Party, it is easy to see Miller as an embodiment of the rightward turn of conservative politics. But, in the past year, he has made enemies among people at D.H.S. who shared his goals of tightening enforcement and revamping the legal-immigration system yet were alarmed by his contempt for policy channels and his disregard for the law. As one of them told me, Miller was conducting "a kind of permanent political campaign." Miller tried to enlist officials to bolster the President's claims about immigrant crime. David Lapan, a retired colonel who worked for John Kelly at D.H.S., told me, "He'd say, 'You need to work harder to show how bad immigrants are. Highlight stories on criminal immigrants getting charged after being released.'"

On Fridays, Miller convened a meeting at the Eisenhower Office Building, next to the White House, to discuss the ways in which federal bureaucrats were falling short of implementing Trump's agenda. Eventually, career officials stopped attending, and Miller's audience became the political appointees who were already aligned with him. He harangued them, too. At one meeting, displeased with an ICE official who had once worked at the Center for Immigration Studies, he told him, "I'll send you right back to writing blog posts for C.I.S."

After Trump ended the family-separation policy, he was forced to make another concession. More families were fleeing Central America and travelling to the U.S., owing in part to the cycle of restrictive measures being adopted, then refashioned and sometimes abandoned after court challenges and political setbacks. When border policy changes in frequent and conspicuous ways, news tends to spread through Central America. "Trump made for the perfect sales pitch for smugglers: Come now, before it's too late!" James Nealon, a former senior D.H.S. official, told me. The department ran out of detention space, and had to resume the catch-and-release policy.

According to a D.H.S. official who worked closely with Miller, as "the problems got more complex, and as the frustrations mounted," his behavior became erratic. At meetings, he would ask for data that were irrelevant to the discussion, then launch into a monologue. Another D.H.S. official said, "You didn't know which Stephen you were going to get. He could be very articulate, then he'd be quoting Breitbart in a diatribe. It was all over the place." His policy ideas were often impracticable or unrelated to the issue under discussion. He wanted the department to house all migrants at Guantánamo Bay, and the F.B.I. to conduct immigration arrests. One official told me, "It got tedious. None of it would solve the problem we had. And, at the end of the operations he was pushing, the question would just be: Are you going to have something meaningful and sustainable that isn't just a sharp elbow?"

Department officials felt that they knew how to manage the border crisis. They needed more resources, to house families and children, and other agencies needed to absorb the overflow. But, the official said, Miller "had unreasonable expectations about how fast the bureaucracy could write rules to fix the biggest problems we had. His default position was that there was a bunch of bureaucrats in the bowels of ICE or Citizenship and Immigration Services who didn't want this to happen."

Because Miller had inserted himself into D.H.S.'s policymaking process, officials felt obliged to shield their work from him. At one point, to keep Miller from discovering the details of a policy discussion, the head of D.H.S. held meetings in a classified security bunker, known as a SCIF, where cell phones are prohibited and strict rules of confidentiality are in effect. Convinced that a cabal of deep-state actors was trying to thwart Trump's agenda, Miller had effectively forced officials to go underground in their own agencies. Steve Bannon told me, "Stephen's experience has deepened his belief in the deep state, that they're all going to leak in an attempt to stop his policy efforts."

Increasingly, Miller lashed out at high-level D.H.S. officials, even those who favored many of the same policies. A frequent target was Francis Cissna, the director of Citizenship and Immigration Services since 2017, who had worked to reshape the immigration system in ways that were often too technical to capture mainstream attention. Cissna had been an immigration lawyer in the government for more than a decade; when he got married, his wedding cake was decorated with an edible version of the Immigration and Nationality Act. "He's an immigration nerd," Barbara Strack, a former colleague, told me. Cissna was a hero to members of the restrictionist movement: deeply knowledgeable, he framed his actions as a commitment to the rule of law.

For months, Cissna had been working on the Administration's most significant attempt to overhaul the legal-immigration system: the "public-charge rule," which would allow the government to block millions of people—disproportionately, immigrants from Latin America, Africa, and Asia—from getting green cards based on their income. It typically takes two years to fully implement a rule, but Miller wanted it done more quickly. He already resented Cissna for what he called the "asylum fraud crisis" at the border, since Cissna's agency was in charge of handling asylum applications. After he hectored Cissna on one interagency phone call, with dozens of officials listening in, Cissna told him to stand down.

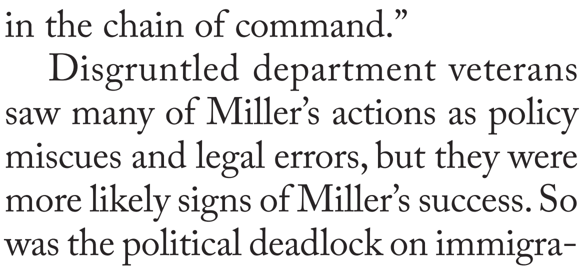
"I won't stand down," Miller shouted. "I won't stand down. I won't stand down."

On another occasion, during a meeting in the White House Situation Room, Miller lambasted Ronald Vitiello, the head of ICE, who had worked in immigration enforcement for more than three decades, for not single-handedly rewriting federal rules on the detention of children. "You ought to be working on this regulation all day, every day," Miller told him. "It should be the first thought you have when you wake up. And it should be the last thought you have before you go to bed."

Cissna, Vitiello, and others were exasperated by Miller's lack of interest in setting sound policies. "We'd say, 'Well, the law says this and that, you'd need to make changes,'" an official told me. "Then we'd get the phone call again, and the proposal would be slightly different. We'd say, 'You still can't do that.' They'd come back to us again. Finally, sure, it was lawful, but it was also stupid." Officials came to think that Miller was territorial; he wanted to be the only immigration expert in the room at all times, and he was willing to undermine like-minded people who might impede his access to the President. One of them told me, "He's not a true believer. If he were, he'd want to get the agenda done right."

In April, Miller initiated a purge of D.H.S. It began with the firing of Nielsen, then continued with the ouster of Vitiello, Cissna, the head of Customs and Border Protection, and the department's top lawyer. Restrictionist groups like the Center for Immigration Studies protested Cissna's departure. Chuck Grassley, who had worked with Cissna on the Senate Judiciary Committee, said that the President was "pulling the rug out from the very people that are trying to help him accomplish his goal." But with Nielsen and the other officials gone, Miller was able to move loyalists into the top positions. One of them was Matthew Albence, the new head of ICE, who, in congressional testimony from 2018, compared family-detention facilities to "summer camp." A senior D.H.S. official said, "Now there are no breaks in the chain of command."

Disgruntled department veterans saw many of Miller's actions as policy miscues and legal errors, but they were more likely signs of Miller's success. So was the political deadlock on immigration, which the White House was deliberately exacerbating. Michael Chertoff, who led D.H.S. under George W. Bush, told me, "The only two arguments you hear now are 'Don't enforce the law at all,' or 'Be draconian.'" Miller has exploited calls by left-wing Democrats to abolish ICE and to decriminalize border crossings. On the whole, public outrage has dissipated, and the federal courts, which are increasingly populated by Trump appointees, are starting to uphold the Administration's policies. The U.S. is resettling the fewest number of refugees in its history; there are more than fifty-five thousand asylum seekers stuck in Mexico under a policy called the Migrant Protection Protocols; and the Central American asylum deals—known as safe third-country agreements—are expanding. A former senior official told me, "Without Miller, Nielsen would still be secretary. There would be no safe third-country agreements, no M.P.P. He pushed and pushed. He simply works harder than everyone else."



Last October, the President's fourth head of Homeland Security, Kevin McAleenan, who filled the position left by Nielsen, announced his resignation, six months into the job. "What I don't have control over is the tone, the message, the public face and approach of the department in an increasingly polarized time," he told the Washington *Post*. White House officials initially distrusted McAleenan, who was a career official and had served during the Obama Administration. Yet the President soon came to depend on McAleenan's experience: after he took charge of the department, the number of immigrants apprehended at the southern border dropped by close to sixty per cent. He was also the lead negotiator of the Central American asylum deals. When McAleenan tendered his resignation, Miller initially refused to accept it.

In late fall, as Trump's impeachment hearings began, Miller tried to limit his own public exposure. "He was getting a little too much steady attention, so he knew he had to hang back," a top Administration official told me. Miller has survived the upheavals in Trump's inner circle by representing himself as a member of the supporting cast. This strategy was reinforced by the demise of Steve Bannon, who, a few months before being fired, in August, 2017, appeared on the cover of *Time*, next to the headline "THE GREAT MANIPULATOR." Sessions was forced out in November, 2018, after having recused himself from the Russia probe. Trump continued to mock him, often in front of Miller. According to someone who witnessed the exchanges, Miller never spoke up to defend his mentor. He was "part of the family now," a White House official told me.

By the end of November, Miller was back in the news, though not by choice.

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The Southern Poverty Law Center acquired and published hundreds of e-mails that Miller had exchanged, between 2015 and 2016, with editors at Breitbart. They included links to articles on the white-supremacist Web site VDARE, as well as an enthusiastic reference to "The Camp of Saints," a racist French novel about the ravages of immigration. In one e-mail, Miller approvingly forwarded an article arguing that the U.S. should deport immigrants on trains "to scare out the people who want to undo our country." In Congress, there were calls for his resignation, but only from Democrats.

The e-mail scandal barely registered at the White House, where Miller faced a greater challenge. At Trump's behest, Jared Kushner—who was already responsible for negotiating peace in the Middle East, overhauling international trade agreements, and leading the President's reëlection campaign—has added immigration to his portfolio. "Stephen understands that Kushner is the real power," a former White House official said. "He would never cross Kushner."

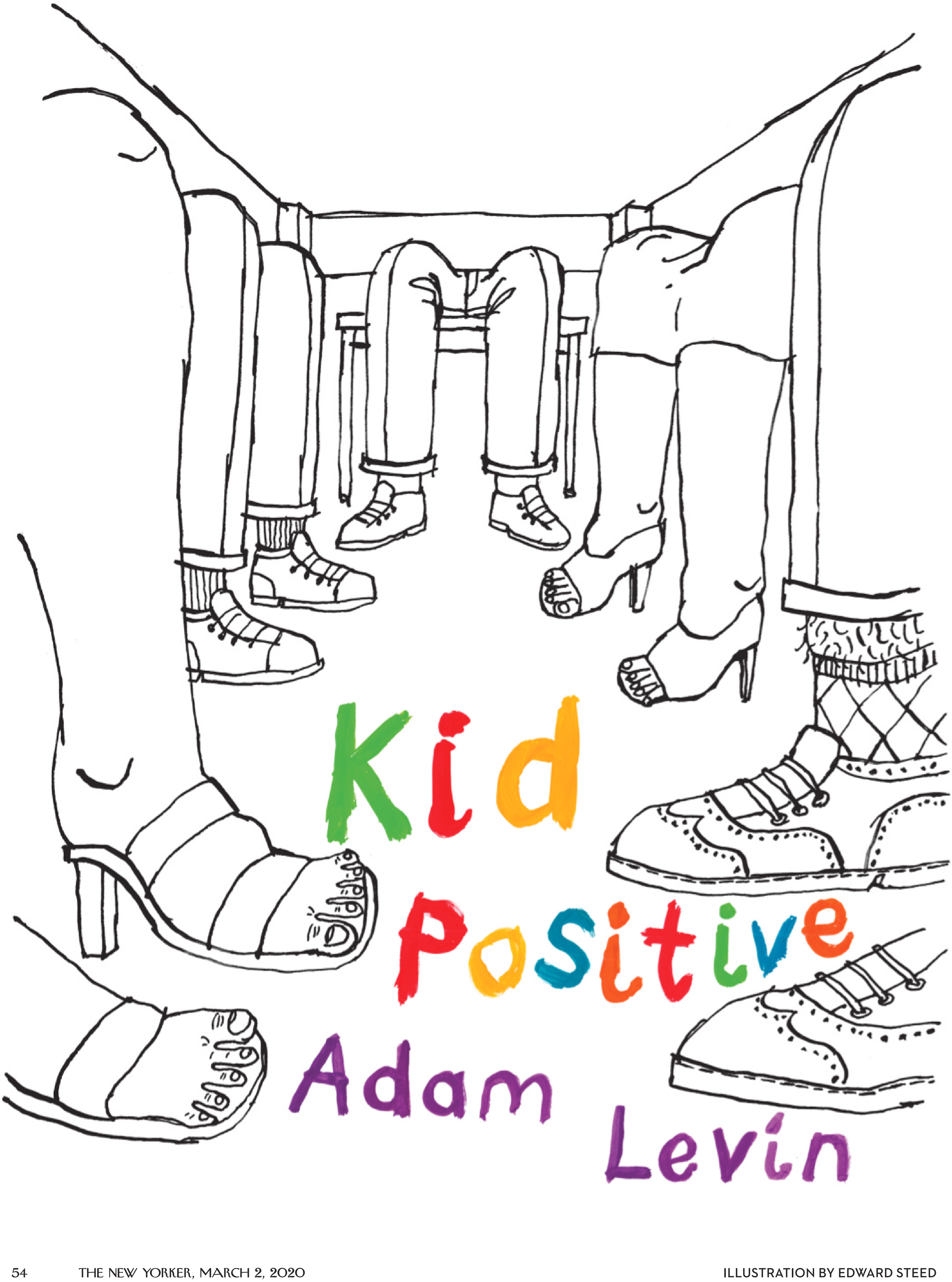
"When Kushner came in to work on this, he told people that they were too close to the issue, that he had the distance from it that was needed," a senior Republican aide told me. A number of people Kushner consulted on the Hill recommended that he start by trying smaller deals, such as one on DACA. "I'm doing this big or I'm not doing it at all," he responded. In May, from a dais in the White House Rose Garden, Trump announced the broad contours of Kushner's "merit-based" immigration plan, in which applicants would be evaluated based not on family ties, as in the current system, but on a combination of factors, including language skills, education, and employment prospects. (Sitting in the front row was Lindsey Graham, who was now one of Trump's strongest allies.) In 2013, when Miller was first engaged in immigration policy, he and Sessions talked about moving to a merit-based system, and "it was laughed about," one of the former Republican aides told me. "It wasn't just a fringe position. It was a politically impossible position." Now the proposal represents the White House's "moderate" pitch, though it is still unlikely to get through Congress.

A six-hundred-page bill that details Kushner's plan has been circulating in Washington. It would not directly lower the number of legal immigrants allowed into the country each year, but, so far, Miller has coöperated with Kushner, writing the parts of it that address asylum and family detention. "Jared is the most powerful White House adviser, but he's very busy," a person who has worked closely with both Miller and Kushner told me. "Miller is focussed on one thing. He and Kushner make situational alliances. They both think the President needs the other, and they each believe in the other's absolute loyalty to Trump. In all my time around them, I have never heard either one of them say a negative word about the other, and that's not true of anyone else."

Recently, the number of migrants intercepted at the border has dropped significantly—from a hundred and forty-four thousand, in May, 2019, to thirty-six thousand, last month. Asylum seekers stuck in Mexico have given up on reaching the U.S. America's legal and moral standing may not survive the Administration's immigration policies, but Trump has succeeded in realizing one of his most infamous tweets: "Our country is full."

With the border virtually sealed, Miller is turning his attention inward. D.H.S. has begun sending armed agents from Border Patrol SWAT teams to New York, Chicago, and other so-called sanctuary cities, where local law enforcement has limited its coöperation with ICE. "There's no one left at D.H.S. to say 'No' to Miller anymore," a senior department official told me. Another official was present at a meeting in which Miller advocated allowing ICE officers to pull children out of school.

This summer, months before the election, the Supreme Court is expected to rule on whether the Administration can cancel DACA. "Everything—everything!—hinges on that decision," a former senior D.H.S. official told me. If the Supreme Court ends DACA, then "Miller will be in ecstasy. He'll finally have the leverage over the Democratic Congress that he's been dying to have this entire time. He'll say, 'Well, you're all worried we're going to deport them. What will you agree to?'" The official continued, "It'll be the summer of a huge campaign, and Miller will be in his glory." ♦



Kid Positive

Adam Levin

ILLUSTRATION BY EDWARD STEED

SHITTY LITTLE TEVYE, BIG BROTHER, 1980

I liked dinner with my parents and their friends in the dining room. The chairs were large and hard to move. Whenever I had to go to the bathroom, I would crawl my way under the table to get there.

Some of the adults, as I brushed against their legs, made surprised sounds and said jokey things.

"Is there a dog in here? I didn't know you had a dog!"

"This house must be haunted. A ghost touched my leg!"

I knew they knew I knew they were pretending. We were all in on the joke together, people.

Once, we people were in the middle of the joke, and my father said, "Honey," to my mom in his hard voice. He didn't like that I was under the table.

After using the toilet, I stepped up on the crate and washed my hands twice so my father would be proud of me. Then I remembered he couldn't see everything. He wouldn't know what I'd done unless I told him. And I knew that if I told him he'd tell me not to show off, so I decided I would sing. Singing beat twice-washed hands by a mile.

My father's favorite song was not "If I Were a Rich Man," from "Fiddler on the Roof," and yet, for some reason, I thought it was. I knew half the chorus and I thought I had a pretty good dance that went with it, a chicken-looking dance where you flapped your bent arms and threw sideways punches while stepping high or jumping.

Returning from the bathroom, I danced that dance and sang the half chorus:

> If I were a rich man
> Yabba dabba dabba baba
> Biddy biddy biddy bum!
> All day long I'd biddy biddy bum
> If I were a wealthy man!

Except for my dad, the adults found it cute. You could tell by their smiles. My dad smiled, too, and said, "O.K.," a few times, but he didn't mean it. It wasn't O.K.

I knew it was best to quit while ahead, so, after three more half choruses, I ceased to sing and dance, stopping on the *biddy* preceding the *bum!*, and dove below the table.

It was there, amid the legs, that I made my mistake. The adults were clapping, saying, "Adorable" and "So creative," and I thought the greatest thing would be to give them an encore. I thought it would be both funny and musical to start singing again from the *bum!* I'd abandoned. The part of the dance that went with the *bum!* was the part where you jumped, so I did that, also. My head struck the table, silver clanged china, I fell on a woman's unshod foot—our carpet was white—and the woman shrieked, the shriek became a giggle, and my father said, "Adam. Goddammit. Adam." He was back to the hard voice. But the woman kept giggling and my mom was giggling, too, so I thought I could win.

I came out from under the table, clutching my head, faking a limp, and I turned to all the adults with a cry-face. The women made cooing sounds and their husbands said things like "Hey now, buddy," and "You sang that one great, pal."

As soon as I sensed the fakeout losing power, I tucked my fists in my armpits and launched again into "Rich Man."

My father stood and pointed at the ceiling. He said that I had to go to my room. My mother said, "Honey," to my father in her hard voice. My father told my mother, "He's acting like an idiot." My father told me, "A real fucking idiot."

•

A few months later, my parents brought my sisters home. I didn't know which name belonged to which sister. The one who'd been yellow through the window in the hospital was no longer yellow. She was smaller than the other one, but except for that they looked the same, and you couldn't see the difference in size in their faces.

My dad had set them down at either end of the couch, still in their car seats, and I ran back and forth from one to the other, kissing each on the cheek and saying, "I love you, Rachel," and "I love you, Paula." I did this partly because my mother was watching and she thought it was cute. Also, though, I meant it. Their features were huge.

One sister would be mine, but I didn't know which. My mom said it was up to me. That was our deal.

A few days later, I chose Rachel, the smaller one. Her eyebrows did a thing when she cried—a kind of inward and upward creeping and thickening—that seemed to signal some kind of intention, which made her more real, and I'd rush to hug her. When Paula cried, she looked like an animal.

PUPPET, 1981

A puppet on a show I liked to watch in the morning was down at the mouth and sitting on a boulder. Hesitantly, almost as a question, the puppet remarked, "I think, therefore I am." It leaped to the ground and repeated the phrase less tentatively. Then it smiled and paced and chanted the phrase with increasing conviction until, at last, its pacing turned to dancing and the chant became a song the puppet sang to the tune of "The Farmer in the Dell."

> I think, therefore I am
> I think, therefore I am
> I think, therefore I am, I think
> I think therefore I am.

I told my mom that I didn't understand.

"It's saying," she said, "that, because it knows it thinks, it knows it's real. Eat your CoCo Wheats."

"It's a puppet, though," I said. "It doesn't think."

"We're supposed to forget it's a puppet while we're watching the show. We're supposed to pretend that the puppet can think, and that since it knows it thinks, it knows it's real."

"That's true?" I said.

"Well, not for the puppet, unless we pretend. But what the puppet's saying is true for people. They know that they think, so they know that they're real."

"I know I'm real because I know I think?"

"Yes."

"How do I know I think?" I said.

"Because you can hear yourself think," she said.

"That's it?" I said. "That's the only way?"

"Why are you making that face?" she

said. "Eat your cereal. It's getting lumpy."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"How do I know that you think?" I said. "I can't hear you think."

"I'm telling you I do."

"But I can't hear you doing it."

"You can hear me talk," she said. "What I'm saying is the sound of what I'm thinking."

"How do I know that?"

"Because I'm telling you."

"That doesn't mean . . . that doesn't make sense."

"Calm down," she said.

"I can hear the puppet talk."

"Calm down," she said.

"I can hear the puppet talk and the puppet isn't thinking!"

"I'm not a puppet, Adam. I'm real."

"I can't hear you think!"

"Baby, come on, calm down," she said, and hugged me close. I don't know what happened next. I assume I calmed down, but I don't remember.

THE RABBITS, 1982

I discovered a rabbit hole in our yard. I looked inside and I saw a baby rabbit. I watched it blink its eyes and wanted it.

I'd been told by my mother never to touch a baby rabbit or the hole it lived in, because the rabbit's mother would smell me, fear predators, and never return. I didn't want the baby rabbit to die, so instead of touching it I lied to my mother. I told my mother I'd touched the rabbit, and as I lied I imagined I *had* touched the rabbit, insuring its abandonment and infantile death, and I began to cry.

My mother, in order to calm me down, and because she liked rabbits, said we could try to save the baby rabbit, and she put on some yellow rubber gloves from by the sink and removed a yellow bucket from under the sink. We went outside to the rabbit hole together.

She reached into the hole and removed the rabbit. It sat in her hand. It was smaller than my sister Rachel's foot.

As my mom set the rabbit in the bottom of the bucket, I saw shiny eyes in the hole and told her. She reached into the hole and removed a second rabbit, which she put in the bucket, next to the first. I looked in the hole and saw more shiny eyes. My mother reached in and removed a third rabbit. This continued to happen until we had eleven rabbits in a bucket, all of them shaking.

•

My father came home from work and saw the bucket. He didn't like it. He chewed his lip and dragged his feet.

The rabbits needed milk, but we didn't know that. We gave them carrots, because of Bugs Bunny. We gave them lettuce, because lettuce went with carrots. They needed warmth, because they weren't getting milk, but they may have had rabies, so we couldn't hold them.

•

By morning, two of the eleven were alive. One was sniffing at the lettuce, like things might work out if only he knew how to get it inside him. The other one kept trying to bury her face in the pile of her siblings' corpses for warmth.

My mother called a pet shop for advice. The owner told her to bring him the rabbits, both the dead and the living, that they'd make good food for some of the snakes. He said this over speakerphone—speakerphone was new then, at least in houses, and we used ours a lot, because the novelty excited us—and my mom hung up on him.

"We will not," she told me, "feed the rabbits to snakes."

We took a drive along the road that ran beside the forest preserve, the two living rabbits in the bucket in my lap, the nine dead ones in a large brown bag at my feet. My mom pulled the car over. She said, "I'll keep a lookout."

I left the bag of dead rabbits in the ditch beside the road, then ran to the tree line, bucket in hand. I heaved the two living rabbits as deeply into the forest as I could, and whispered, "Be strong," or maybe "Good luck," and ran back to the car, and asked to go to McDonald's.

CONSONANT TROUBLE, 1983

When I changed my mind about which sister belonged to me, they'd been speaking in sentences for a couple of months, and, for a while after that, neither one had been able to say her "R"s or "L"s—they turned them into "W"s. But then Paula figured out how to speak correctly, whereas Rachel got worse, and I determined she was faking.

Adults found her cute for the way she'd say her own name, "Waychoo," and so she held on to it. That's what I thought. And I thought she was milking it, hamming it up. I thought she was manipulative. Still, Rachel was mine, so I pushed the thoughts down.

Except then I saw Paula cry on the driveway. She'd fallen down and scraped her knee and the tears bubbled over her lower lashes. My mom was inside with Rachel, getting juices.

"My knee," Paula said. "Adam. My knee."

"It's no big deal," I said. "It just stings. Soon it won't."

"O.K.," she said. "Thank you." She wiped her eyes with her sleeves and stopped crying.

TURTLE AND SENSEI, 1984

Mergatroid was the perfect name for the turtle at the pet store, and I knew that instantly, but by the time my mother asked me what I wanted to name it we were in the car on our way to McDonald's and, on top of having just been given a pet, I was minutes away from apple pie in a box. I was so excited that I lost my grasp on the name. I knew that an "R" was near a "T" and a "D," and I tried to combine the sounds in various ways to get to the name, except all I was able to come up with was Gertrude, which didn't feel right, but I was sick of trying and failing to remember, so I told my mom "Gertrude," and my mom said she loved that name and repeated it.

It sounded even worse than when I'd said it, only now my mom loved it, and I hated to disappoint my mom, so I said I loved it, too, and the turtle's

LIZ MONTAGUE

*"I can do my taxes or my laundry—
it's unreasonable to expect me to do both."*

name was Gertrude and I liked Gertrude less than I had in the store.

I liked her less at McDonald's than I had in the car, and less at home than I had at McDonald's. She was boring and smelled and required that you wash your hands after touching her—every single time—because she might be carrying salmonella. She didn't move much, either, and was scared of everything. You'd throw a book at the wall to the left of her tank and she'd hide in her shell, but it took too long to be truly funny.

When Gertrude started sneezing a couple weeks later, though, I got sad. I didn't want her to be sick.

Or I wanted to be the kid with the sick turtle who cared—same difference.

I called for my mom. "Watch," I said.

Gertrude sneezed.

"Oh," my mom said.

She called up a vet, not on speakerphone. I knew the vet must have told her that Gertrude would die soon, but when my mom said the vet said that sometimes turtles aren't made for houses, and that you can't tell whether a turtle is made for a house until you've taken it into a house, and if it's not made for a house then it should be released into the wild where it can have a good long life, I pretended to believe her.

We put Gertrude in the bucket from under the sink and took her to the man-made pond by the school. I crouched in the cattails while my mother watched. I removed Gertrude from the bucket, and set her on the ground. I knew I was supposed to say something childlike and hopeful. I said, "Gertrude, everything's going to be great now. You're not made for houses. You're made for this pond. You will meet another turtle and fall in love with that turtle and you will lay some eggs, and turtle babies will hatch from them. You'll be their mommy!"

I broke off some cattails and, on the way home, I bashed them on the sidewalk, one at a time, and watched them explode into small clouds of fluff. I asked my mom if we could go to McDonald's and she said we could not—her friend Miriam was coming over with her sons and we would play in the yard and maybe have ice cream. Hearing "Miriam," I remembered "Mergatroid." I remembered that was the turtle's real name, and suddenly I loved her, the turtle, little Mergatroid, and started to cry, and my mom thought that I was crying about McDonald's, and she told me that crying wouldn't get me any fucking closer to fucking McDonald's, and this made me cry more, but I couldn't explain. I couldn't tell her that the turtle's real name was Mergatroid, or that I knew Mergatroid was going to die of starvation if her illness didn't kill her, or that not being able to tell her these things was keeping us apart. I hated a liar.

"I want some chicken mcfucking nuggets!" I shouted.

•

"Karate is about respect for ourselves, our bodies, and one another, as well as the natural world that surrounds us everywhere we go in the universe," Sensei Johnson said, at the after-school karate demonstration in the gym. He made a thinking face and adjusted his gi. "Protection is a form of respect," he continued. "Some consider it the highest form of respect." Then he used his heel, his palm, and his elbow to split some stacks of plywood that were laid across cinder blocks.

My mother applauded after each split stack. I whispered to her that I thought I could do it. She said I'd break my hand, and my dad said Sensei Johnson would, too, if the plywood boards he kept striking weren't perforated. "What's that?" I said. "Little punch holes," my dad said, "down the middle of the boards." "That's cheap," I said. "Correcto," my dad said.

The sensei gave us a look—we were on the bottom bleacher, right in the middle—then invited my father to center court to help him. My father said, "Sure," and the audience clapped.

The sensei pulled a tarp off a pile of bricks. He took a brick from the pile and gave it to my father. "What do you got there?" he asked my father. "Appears to be a brick," my father told the sensei. "A regular old brick," Sensei Johnson said. "Kind of brick," he went on, "you might build a house with, you were the kind of person who built things." My dad was bald and weighed too much, but the look on his face when someone used a tone with him always seemed to say, "You need to take a deep breath and remember who you're talking to."

The sensei swept an upturned palm through the air between my father's brick and the cinder blocks. It was a Jedi-looking gesture intended to indicate that my father should set the brick atop the cinder blocks. My father's eyes narrowed and he stood there.

"Would you please set the brick on the blocks?" the sensei said.

My father did so.

"Please stand aside now," the sensei said.

The sensei stepped in front of the cinder blocks, inhaled, exhaled, and inhaled again. He struck the brick with the heel of his hand and it split in two.

Applause erupted.

Once it died down, Sensei Johnson again did the Jedi-looking thing with his palm, but this time he swept it between my father and the bleachers, as if to say, "You may return to your seat now."

My father acted as though the sensei were offering his hand, and he grasped it, firmly, and turned it over, as if to shake it, but instead pulled the sensei closer to his face, then whispered in his ear. I don't know what he whispered, but later on, in the car, he told me he'd only whispered, "Good job," and I knew it wasn't that; the sensei, when my father let go of his hand, looked afraid.

BUNCHES OF A NEST

What I started opposes what I shattered.
Marigolds I planted grow underground in silence.
Your arms hold me tighter.

I love you back with echoes of alternative languages.

Flutter-bees of temporary insanity, cousin of generalities.
My soul in clementine, looking for the gravity
dark matter imposes.

A place of conversations, so spirit-drunk it feels ecclesiastical.

Up the street, a blue jay and a robin in a tree
quiet me with their full-throated tightrope-walking
argumentative vitality.

I walk like a beautiful petrified shell of a woman.

Inside the fabric of my feelings
I am reeling. Disarranged, I long to fix myself
in million-year starlight beyond soil, latitude, season.

To what end are endings, to what end do we?

Below the dogwood's pinwheel
white blossoms, face up with oxygen petals,
twigs, grass, yarn lie disassembled.

Bunches of a nest. A tiny bird, face down, beyond.

—Diane Mehta

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That last part's made up. I don't remember what really happened after the audience applauded the splitting of the brick, but I remember that when I told my best friend, Sung Kim, about the karate demonstration—Sung had had strep all week, so he'd missed it—I made it up the same way. I said my father had whispered something to the sensei that had made the sensei look afraid.

THE FROST AND THE FROGS, 1985-86

For a year or so, I'd throw our cat as far as I could. It would land on its feet and come back to get thrown again. The best place to throw it was the hallway connecting the kitchen to the living room. The floor was stone, and if the cat made noise in the air there were echoes.

Had you asked me if I thought the cat had feelings, I probably would have told you I thought it did. That would have seemed like what you were trying to get at, and I would have wanted to be agreeable.

My sisters had tender feelings for the cat, and only threw it when angry, usually after it had bitten or scratched them. They never seemed to get any joy out of throwing it.

The cat was a frost-point Siamese. My mother named it Frosty, which mostly stuck. Sometimes, though, we just called it the Frost.

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At overnight camp, somebody saw a snake behind the tennis courts. We abandoned our game, Sung Kim and I, and ran over to the snake. Though I'd never seen one that wasn't on a screen, I knew snakes were bad. Sung did, too. "This fucker," he said. "Look at this fucker. Do you think it's poison? Do you think we should kill it?" I struck it an overhand blow with my racket. It bunched up and vomited three small frogs. All of them were coated in a creamy yellow slime, and two were on their sides, perfectly still, but one of the third one's legs was moving. It wasn't moving fast enough to call the movement *twitching*, but it wasn't moving sensibly enough to suggest that the frog was *trying to leap away to safety*. Sung started crying. The snake began to throw itself side to side. "Kill it," I said. Sung stepped on its head and threw up on the frogs.

O. HENRY, 1987

Back in the summer of 1983, my sisters wore underwear during the day, but they couldn't be trusted not to wet the bed, and so they had to wear diapers at night. They weren't allowed to wear underwear at night until they'd gone four nights in a row without an accident. This final phase of toilet training was taking too long.

My parents were worried, and I wanted a dog, so I offered them a deal: I'd put an end to my sisters' nocturnal enuresis once and for all if we could get a dog.

"You think you're clever," my father said.

"He is," my mother said.

"He knows that even if he fails we won't have the heart to take the dog away—*you* won't have the heart to."

"He does know," my mother said. "He's smart."

"I'll tell you what," my father told me. "You get them to quit wetting themselves, and *then* you get a dog. You've got one week."

That night, after bedtime, while my parents watched television down in the family room, I sneaked into my sisters' room. They slept on beds with rails on the side, and I squatted in the corner where their heads would have met if it weren't for the rails, and said their names, and said, "We're getting a dog."

"When?" they said.

"In just a few days," I said. "But you can't tell Mom and Dad I told you. If you tell them I told you, then we don't get a dog."

•

The following morning, their diapers were wet.

That night, after bedtime, I woke them again.

"We didn't get the dog," Paula said.

"It won't be for a few more days," I said, "but I saw it this afternoon, while you napped. It's even better than I thought. Furrier, smaller. We might not get it, though. Dad was angry you wet your diapers. He's really sick of that. He told Mom no dog if you wet them again. Either of you."

"For how long?" Paula said.

"Forever," I said. "Or we'll never get a dog, and it'll be your fault."

Paula started crying.

"It's O.K., Pauly," Rachel said. "It's easy. We just have to get up when we have to pee."

•

For the next four nights, neither sister had an accident. We visited a breeder and bought a Pomeranian. My mother named her Puffy, which mostly stuck. Sometimes, though, we just called her the Puff.

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The Puff was very cute, but the Puff wouldn't house-train, which was not very cute, and got less and less cute.

After three months, we brought in a specialist. The specialist said that, when the Puff had an accident, we had to show the Puff the accident. If the accident was liquid, we had to bring the Puff's carrier cage within inches of the accident and lock the Puff inside the cage for an hour. If the accident was solid, we had to put the accident *in* the cage and lock the Puff inside for an hour.

•

He was a behaviorist, the specialist, and so am I. When I talk about behaviorism, some people feel attacked. They think I'm trying to tell them that I think they're puppets, when what I'm trying to tell them is that *they* think they're puppets.

•

Perhaps I've gotten off track. It's hard to say.

Anyway, the specialist was not a particularly good behaviorist—he was artless in both senses of the word, completely uncharming, had a weak sense of narrative—and I, back then, was not yet a behaviorist, none of us were, we all believed in our own free will, and the specialist's instructions seemed too cruel to follow, and none of us followed them.

After some weeks, the Puff still wasn't house-trained, and so we returned the Puff to the breeder.

I don't think we got a refund.

I think that's what all the yelling was about.

•

Four years later, it was 1987, and, on the school bus, I told the Puffy anecdote to Ronald Stanton, who was new at school and smelled. I told it mostly the same, but without any mention of the behaviorist stuff, and instead of saying, "I don't think we got a refund. I think that's what all the yelling was about," I said, "Isn't that totally hilarious?"

"It's cute," Ronald said. "Too cute. It's bullshit."

"You made the end up," Tommy Esposito, a kid a grade above me with an oily nose, said. He sat across the aisle from us, and he'd eavesdropped. "Or if you didn't make up the end," Tommy said, "then you made up the beginning. The whole thing is way too pat and ironic. It's like one of those O. Henry stories, but shittier, because there isn't even a moral about how people should be. And if you really had a dog and you had to get rid of it, you would have cried like a baby, 'cause that's the kind of person you are."

"You fat-ass greaseball," Ronald said to Tommy. "Who was even talking to you, anyway?"

This took me by surprise. I didn't understand the re-triangulation. I still don't understand it.

"You're trash," Tommy said to Ronald. "And you smell."

"I smell like your sister's hairy pussy," Ronald said.

HUM, 1988

There was something almost cute about the way that Giles Crowley, when you shoved him, said, "Hum." I was the first kid at school to appreciate this, and I'd shove him at lockers in the hall between classes, shove him at a backstop or a post during gym, and I'd shove him at drinking fountains, occupied and un-.

I never shoved him at girls, because that was for friends, but I didn't shove him into urinals, either—that was for enemies.

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One outdoor recess at the start of eighth grade, I came up from behind him and shoved him at nothing. He stumbled forward three steps, instead of just one, and said, "Hum-um-um," before catching his balance. I got behind him again and shoved him harder. "Hum-um-um-um," he said, stumbling forward four steps.

Then some others nearby started shoving Giles, and Giles started running. We chased him around for the remainder of recess. Five of us at first, then ten, then twenty, some of us his friends. He wasn't very fast.

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The unspoken idea was to be the one to throw the shove that produced the hum with the longest string of syllables. The longest string of syllables that first day was six. I was the one who made it happen. I made it happen twice, then shoved even harder in pursuit of seven hums, but Giles fell to his knees after humming just once.

The second day, no one got higher than five, and I started thinking six itself was the goal. I started thinking that to get above six would be a matter of fortune rather than finesse. Seven or eight would be a grand slam, but six was the homer. Six was all that you could reasonably aim for.

•

Had you asked me if I thought Giles Crowley had feelings, I would probably have told you that I had feelings, because that would have addressed what I would have thought you were secretly trying to get at with your question, and I'd have wanted you to know that I was smarter than you.

•

On what would otherwise have been the third day of the game, a thunderstorm struck and we had indoor recess. Someone said something about beating six, and I said something about fortune and finesse, my grand-slam-versus-homer idea, and then someone else said I had it all wrong, that batting orders were designed to increase the likelihood that a grand slam might happen, that that's why you put the sluggers fourth in the lineup, behind the three guys with the highest batting averages—to increase the chances of loading the bases prior to a homer. In other words, sure, seven hums might be less of a homer than it was a grand slam, but that didn't mean it wasn't worth strategizing about: there were things you could do. I conceded the point to the kid who was making it—beyond the basic rules, I knew little about baseball—and this opened up the conversation to all manner of hypotheses on how to increase the likelihood of seven-humming Giles. There were those of us who thought it was a matter of the kind of ground on which he stood, a simple question of grass versus asphalt. Others thought it was more about the points of contact—two palms to one shoulder to send him spinning, a palm to each shoulder to keep him moving straight, maybe even just one palm low on the spine so he'd buckle as he stumbled. Still others believed it was more Giles-dependent—how rigid he was at the moment of impact, the angles at which his feet were pointed, whether he'd eaten his Flintstones that morning.

•

The fourth day, recess was back outside, but shoving Giles was no longer fun. This may have been because we'd acknowledged aloud and then proceeded to analyze what had formerly been, or at least had seemed to have been, a telepathic understanding of the game's strange goal, and thus robbed the game of all, or most, of its magic.

Then again, it may have been because of how Giles, as we rushed through the exit to find him in the field, was standing just a few feet outside the door, as if he was giving us a chance to catch up.

He smiled at me when my eyes met his.

Someone gave him a shove. He hummed twice and ran. We chased him for a couple of minutes, then stopped.

SPLASH PAD, 2015

On our way back home to Chicago from Paris, my wife and I stayed for a couple of days with some friends of ours who lived in Brooklyn. They had two children, a five- and a three-year-old. Pleasant little kids. Adorable, too. Maybe we loved them. For sure we loved their parents. Their parents were our favorite couple—still are.

On the second afternoon of the visit, we all went to Prospect Park, to an attraction there that they called the splash pad: a sort of giant fountain with multiple spigots distributed along its circumference. Scores of little kids get inside this thing, the floor of which I believe is soft—I didn't go in, but splash *pad*, right?—and play, with high energy, amid flying water.

Our friends' kids seemed so thrilled to be there. All the kids in the splash pad seemed thrilled. They played alone and they played with their families and they played with their friends and with strangers, too. They pretended to be this or that kind of animal, this or that robot, this or that hero or villain or vehicle. They taught dances and jokes and songs to one another, leaped around in patterns and proto-flirted.

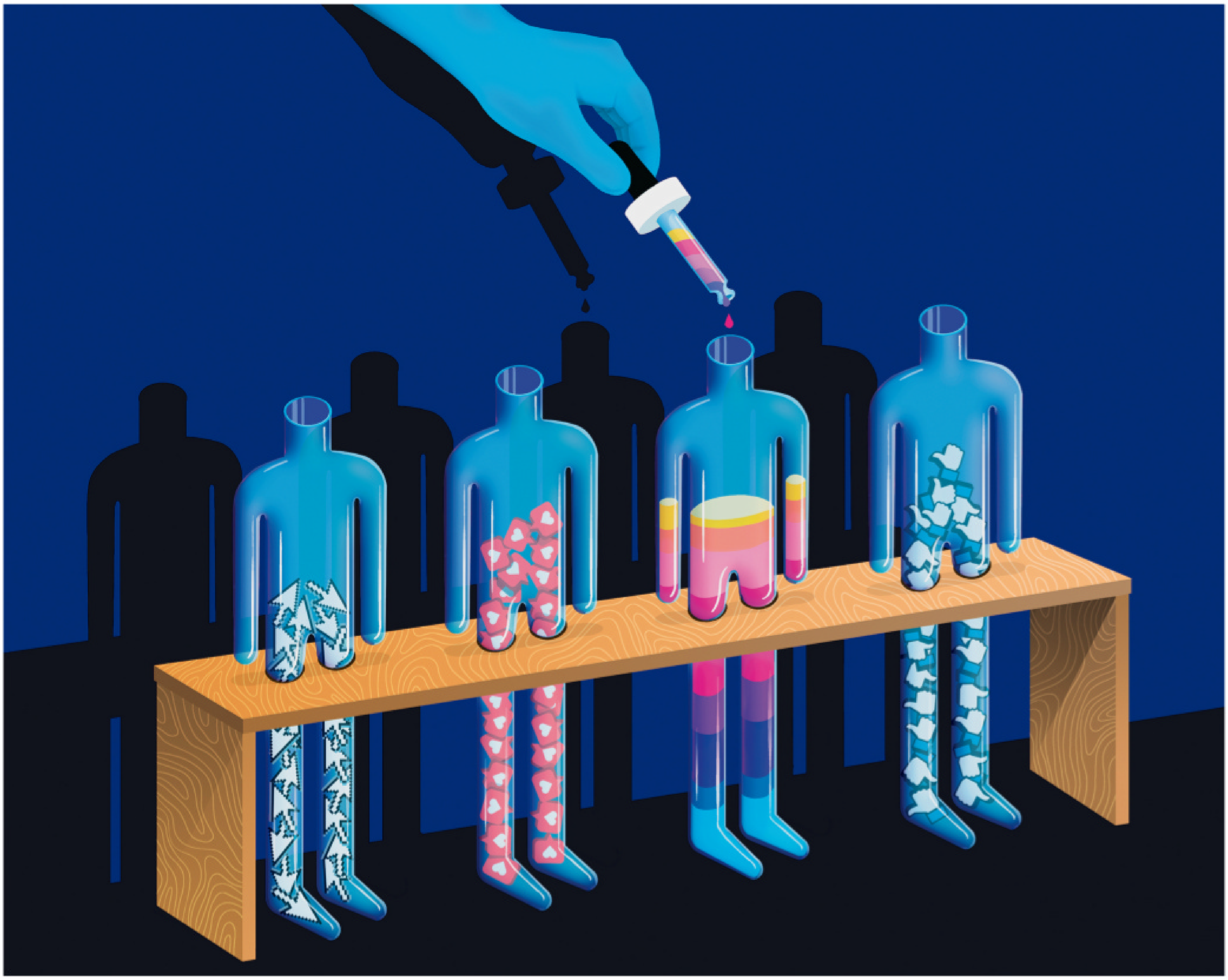
Their pleasure was contagious. I was feeling kid positive. So kid positive that, when I told our friends how kid positive I felt, I got a little expansive, almost lyrical. I said that these kids in the splash pad were better than we had been, that the way these kids were playing in the splash pad was better than the ways in which we would have played in the splash pad if we'd had a splash pad when we were kids, and it would leave them, I suspected, with the kinds of lasting sensory impressions that form the kinds of joyful memories that loving parents hope their children will carry always, thereby fostering deep within them greater capacities for kindness and decency than the people of our generation possessed, and that, down the line, these greater capacities for kindness and decency would grant these kids the strength they'd need to neutralize and overcome what would otherwise be our generation's malforming influence and, eventually, turn the whole country, perhaps even the whole world, into a safer and friendlier place. Or so it seemed to me, I said.

"Are you making fun of us, Levin?" our friends said.

"You making fun of our children?" they said.

"I don't think so," I said, and that was true at the time. ♦

THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST
Adam Levin reads "Kid Positive."



BOOKS

EXPERIMENTS ON TRIAL

Has the new era of experimentation remembered the lessons of the old?

BY HANNAH FRY

Dr. John Haygarth knew that there was something suspicious about Perkins's Metallic Tractors. He'd heard all the theories about the newly patented medical device—about the way flesh reacted to metal, about noxious electrical fluids being expelled from the body. He'd heard that people plagued by rheumatism, pleurisy, and toothache swore the instrument offered them miraculous relief. Even George Washington was said to own a set. But Haygarth, a physician who had pioneered a method of preventing smallpox, sensed a sham. He set out to find the evidence.

The year was 1799, and the Perkins tractors were already an international phenomenon. The device consisted of a pair of metallic rods—rounded on one end and tapering, at the other, to a point. Its inventor, Elisha Perkins, insisted that gently stroking each tractor over the affected area in alternation would draw off the electricity and provide relief. Thousands of sets were sold, for twenty-five dollars each. People were even said to have auctioned off their horses just

For Big Tech, users are ideal test subjects. But the research we unknowingly participate in is seldom revealed.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEXANDER GLANDIEN

"He seems to have drifted from online activism to couch-based complacency."

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to get hold of a pair. And, in an era when your alternatives might be bloodletting, leeches, and purging, you could see the appeal.

Haygarth had a pair of dummy tractors created, carved carefully from wood and painted to resemble the originals. They were to be used on five unsuspecting patients at Bath General Hospital, in England, each suffering from chronic rheumatism. Using the lightest of touches, the fakes were drawn over the affected areas, with remarkable results. Four of the five patients declared that their pain was relieved. One reported a tingling sensation that lasted for two hours. Another regained the ability to walk.

The following day, Haygarth repeated his test using the true metallic tractors, with the same results. Other physicians soon followed his lead, using increasingly elaborate fakes of their own: nails, pencils, even old tobacco pipes in place of the tractors. Each brought the truth more clearly into focus: the tractors were no better than make-believe.

This humble experiment wasn't the only one of its kind. By the start of the nineteenth century, experimentation had already driven two centuries of significant changes in science. The Royal Society of London, the scientific academy of which Haygarth was an elected fellow, began insisting that all claims needed to be verified and reproduced before they could be accepted as scientific fact. A shakeup was under way. Astronomy had split off from astrology. Chemistry had become disentangled from alchemy. The motto of the society neatly encapsulated the new spirit of inquiry: *Nullius in Verba.* Translation: "Take nobody's word for it."

Physics, chemistry, and medicine have had their revolution. But now, driven by experimentation, a further transformation is in the air. That's the argument of "The Power of Experiments" (M.I.T.), by Michael Luca and Max H. Bazerman, both professors at the Harvard Business School. When it comes to driving our decisions in a world of data, they say, "the age of experiments is only beginning."

In fact, if you've recently used Facebook, browsed Netflix, or run a Google search, you have almost certainly participated in an experiment of some kind. Google alone ran fifteen thousand of them in 2018, involving countless unsuspecting Internet users. "We don't want high-level executives discussing whether a blue background or a yellow background will lead to more ad clicks," Hal Varian, Google's chief economist, tells the authors. "Why debate this point, since we can simply run an experiment to find out?"

Luca and Bazerman focus on a new breed of large-scale social experiments, the power of which has already been demonstrated in the public sector. As they note, governments have used experiments to find better ways to get their citizens to pay taxes on time, say, or to donate organs after death. N.G.O.s have successfully deployed experiments in developing countries to test the effects of everything from tampons to textbooks. The impact of a simple experiment can be dramatic, particularly in monetary terms.

A few years ago, if you searched for eBay on Google, the top two results would take you directly to the auction site's home page. The second one was produced organically by the Google algorithm; the first was an advertisement, paid for by eBay and meant to pop up whenever its name appeared as a keyword in someone's search.

Steve Tadelis, a professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley, was spending a year at eBay at the time, and was suspicious about the value of placing such ads. Wouldn't people get to eBay anyway if they were searching for it, without the sponsored results? But, as Luca and Bazerman recount, eBay's marketing group defended the millions of dollars spent on the ads each year, noting that many people who clicked on them ended up buying things on eBay.

An experiment was in order. By turning Google ads on and off, Tadelis and his research team tracked the traffic coming to their site and discovered that—as Tadelis had suspected—much of the money eBay had been shelling out was wasted. The marketing team had an exaggerated notion of how valuable those ads were: without the sponsored result, searchers would simply click on the free organic links instead.

The company could (and did) save itself millions.

There's an important point in all of this: instead of going by our possibly unreliable intuition, we can, in a range of cases, know for sure whether an intervention has an effect by running a trial and collecting the evidence. It's a step that Esther Duflo, who shared a Nobel Prize in Economics for her work using experiments to study how global poverty can be alleviated, makes a particularly strong case for. Without gathering and analyzing the evidence, she has said, "we are not any better than the medieval doctors and their leeches."

The most reliable way to test an intervention is by using a type of experiment known as a "randomized controlled trial" (R.C.T.). You randomly assign subjects to groups and then treat each group differently. One group will receive the intervention, while another, the "control" group, will not. Control here is key. The aim is to make the groups as similar as possible, to constrain as many variables as you can manage, because if the only thing allowed to change freely is the intervention itself you can study its true effect. In the tech world, the "intervention" might simply be a different Web-page layout or a new pricing plan. Here, the usual term is "A/B testing," but the objective is the same: to create some basis for comparison.

Such studies tell you whether something works, though not why. Haygarth's experiment wasn't a randomized trial by modern standards, but he nonetheless proved the power of experimenting: by directly comparing the experiences of patients on the day they got treated with the tractors with their experiences on the day they were treated with the fakes, he could show that the tractors were duds. The second set of observations served as a kind of control group.

Without a properly randomized control group, there is no real way to measure whether something is working. Take the case of the Scared Straight program, developed in the United States to discourage at-risk kids from choosing a life of crime. The theory seemed sound. By taking young offenders on organized visits to prison and allowing them to meet murderers and armed robbers, they'd see the terrifying consequences of breaking the law, and be less likely to do so themselves in the future.

At first, the program appeared to be a roaring success. Few kids who had been through the program were later involved in crime (as many as ninety-four per cent steered clear, according to one study). The intervention gained public approval and was copied in a number of countries around the world. There was just one tiny problem: no one had stopped to wonder what would have happened to a similar set of kids who hadn't gone through the experience.

When a series of proper R.C.T.s was run, and a direct comparison was made between kids who went through the Scared Straight program and similar groups of kids who didn't, it became clear that the program was not working as intended. The intervention was, in fact, *increasing* the chances that kids would become criminals. Fewer juveniles over all would have ended up committing further crimes if they'd never been taken to visit the jails.

You can see why these experiments have become ubiquitous. They're the ultimate fact finder, overriding the need to rely on intuition. But, for some, their popularity is also a cause for concern, because they aren't always used to nudge our behavior toward the greater good. They're also helping organizations to manipulate us in ways that might not be in our interests.

As "The Power of Experiments" makes clear, there are times when this happens in irritating but relatively harmless ways—a company making a small tweak to a Web site that elevates profits over customer experience, for instance. Consider an experiment that StubHub, the ticket-resale company, ran to determine where best to notify users about its ticketing costs. Should it be up front about them from the moment you land on the page? Or surprise you at checkout? StubHub discovered, after experimenting, that hiding the fees until the last minute led to thirteen per cent more sales, plus tickets that were 5.73 per cent more expensive on average. As Luca and Bazerman explain, "People were buying better, higher-priced tickets when the fees were hidden." The technique did make people less likely to return to the Web site in the following months, but that falloff was not enough to counter the increase in ticket sales and prices.

There are also times when manipulation leaves people feeling cheated. For instance, in 2018 the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Amazon had been inserting sponsored products in its consumers' baby registries. "The ads look identical to the rest of the listed products in the registry, except for a small gray 'Sponsored' tag," the *Journal* revealed. "Unsuspecting friends and family clicked on the ads and purchased the items," assuming they'd been chosen by the expectant parents. Amazon's explanation when confronted? "We're constantly experimenting," a spokesperson said. (The company has since ended the practice.)

But there are times when the experiments go further still, leaving some to question whether they should be allowed at all. There was a notorious experiment run by Facebook in 2012, in which the number of positive and negative posts in six hundred and eighty-nine thousand users' news feeds was tweaked. The aim was to see how the unwitting participants would react. As it turned out, those who saw less negative content in their feeds went on to post more positive stuff themselves, while those who had positive posts hidden from their feeds used more negative words.

A public backlash followed; people were upset to discover that their emotions had been manipulated. Luca and Bazerman argue that this response was largely misguided. They point out that the effect was small. A person exposed to the negative news feed "ended up writing about four additional negative words out of every 10,000," they note. Besides, they say, "advertisers and other groups manipulate consumers' emotions all the time to suit their purposes. If you've ever read a Hallmark card, attended a football game or seen a commercial for the ASPCA, you've been exposed to the myriad ways in which products and services influence consumers' emotions."

In my view, the authors are too sanguine on this issue. It isn't helpful to excuse an experiment based on the average effect it had on hundreds of thousands of people. This wasn't four words each, shared out equally among everyone. Nor is there a way of knowing the initial conditions of those involved in the study. It may be that some people were emotionally stable enough for a tiny effect to make no difference but that others were already close to a tipping point.

It's true that we inhabit a world in which all manner of companies are continually seeking to influence our behavior. But the sequence of messages you see during halftime at the Super Bowl isn't algorithmically curated for your eyes only, based on vast swathes of your highly personalized data. We don't want to live in "The Truman Show." Whatever you think about the particulars of the Facebook study, though, it raised an important question about the care with which experiments on human subjects are handled.

Medicine has already been through this. In the early twentieth century, without a set of ground rules on how people should be studied, medical experimentation was like the Wild West. Alongside a great deal of good work, a number of deeply unethical studies took place—including the horrifying experiments conducted by the Nazis and the appalling Tuskegee syphilis trial, in which hundreds of African-American men were denied treatment by scientists who wanted to see how the lethal disease developed. As a result, there are now clear rules about seeking informed consent whenever medical experiments use human subjects, and institutional procedures for reviewing the design of such experiments in advance. We've learned that researchers aren't always best placed to assess the potential harm of their work.

So what happens now that data scientists have arrived on the scene? They, too, are conducting experiments on people, but they're doing it without that history of public outrage, without a long list of successive scandals, and, crucially, without the scrutiny and ethical framework you'll find in the biomedical sciences. Luca and Bazerman advocate greater voluntary transparency; I'm not convinced that this approach is enough to protect the public from being exploited.

That's not to say that we need a review board every time an online publication runs an A/B test to see which of two headlines draws more readers. Still, if we don't hold everyone to some reasonable ethical standards, a social-media company, in theory, would have free rein to manipulate the amount of politically extreme or anti-climate-change stories displayed in your feed. For that matter, it's possible to imagine a ride-hailing app experimenting to see whether it could wring more money from you when your phone battery was running low. Or a driverless car being deployed on the roads before it was fully functional, leaving bystanders as unwitting participants in a live experiment—although, come to think of it, that scenario doesn't exactly require imagining.

Of course, there's a lot that we don't understand about human behavior which experiments are perfectly placed to explore. They can seem to be self-interpreting, telling us that some treatment or intervention works even when we don't know why. In what was perhaps the first-ever controlled trial, a naval doctor in the seventeen-forties demonstrated that sailors who ate citrus fruits were less afflicted by scurvy, without knowing that the disease was caused by a Vitamin C deficiency. We're still not sure how general anesthesia works, despite having heavily relied on it since the eighteen-fifties; the same is true of many psychiatric drugs.

But, as Luca and Bazerman note, this particular power of randomized experiments—their ability to yield outcomes in advance of explanations—can also be their greatest weakness. When the results arrive without a sound theory of what caused them, we can easily overgeneralize or make erroneous inferences. The conclusions researchers reach can be fantastically sensitive to the way the trial is designed.

At the gym chain 24 Hour Fitness, a team of behavioral scientists wanted to see how they might nudge people into exercising more. Over twenty-eight days, fifty-two interventions were tested (among them text reminders and supportive video material). All were successful at helping people increase their attendance. Had the scientists left the study there, it might have appeared as though they'd found a multitude of ways to get us all into shape. But the scientists knew better. They followed up with the participants of the study beyond the initial period, and discovered that, in fact, none of the interventions produced any lasting change. Tweak the question just slightly, adjust the time frame of investigation, and the answer may come out different, too.

The extreme sensitivity of experiments certainly extends to the selection of participants. Even a slight imbalance can wildly throw off the conclusions. Luca and Bazerman offer the cautionary tale of hormone-replacement therapy (H.R.T.), which, for two decades, was widely prescribed to postmenopausal women as a preventative drug for various conditions associated with aging, including heart disease. A series of studies had demonstrated its impact. Unfortunately, the women in the studies who'd been given H.R.T. had, on average, a higher socioeconomic status than those who hadn't. They were more likely to have good access to medical care, more likely to have health issues diagnosed and treated early. This meant that no one could be sure it was the hormone therapy itself that was yielding the benefit. Indeed, a later large-scale experiment, better randomized across the groups, suggested that H.R.T. was actually increasing the odds of heart disease for some women. (Yet more studies have, in turn, questioned this conclusion; the therapy remains in medical limbo.)

Context matters. The fact that an intervention has been proved to work in one setting doesn't guarantee that it will work in another. This is a particular problem in the behavioral sciences. Angus Deaton, a Nobel laureate in economics, has argued that any such experiment that has been constrained enough to be scientifically rigorous might be too narrow to provide useful guidance for large-scale interventions.

There's a cautionary tale to be found in an experiment that started in Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India that had a serious problem with infant mortality. Babies were being born malnourished after their mothers, worried about the dangers of giving birth to a large baby, were deliberately undereating as they approached labor. Aid agencies designed and tested a program that offered mothers reassurance about advances in maternity care, food supplements, advice, and education. It was a great success. Malnutrition went way down.

Satisfied that a remedy had been found, the project team took the program to Bangladesh, which was suffering from a similar problem: pregnant women worried about childbirth restricting their diet before labor, resulting in malnourished babies fighting to survive. And yet in Bangladesh the intervention made no meaningful difference to the women or their children. Why? The two settings were demographically similar, but there were subtle cultural differences. Part of the answer, as Michael Blastland explains in his new book, "The Hidden Half," was that "in Bangladesh it was not the mother who controlled the family food. It was the mother-*in-law*."

It's tempting to look for laws of people the way we look for the laws of gravity. But science is hard, people are complex, and generalizing can be problematic. Although experiments might be the ultimate truthtellers, they can also lead us astray in surprising ways.

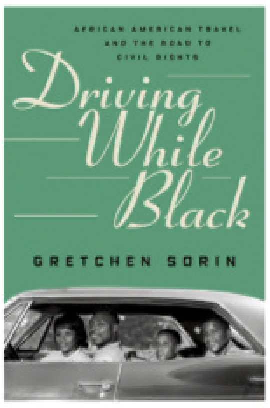
That may be the most important point to remember in this new age of experiments. Science knows that it makes mistakes. It's why the Royal Society, since its inception, has placed so much emphasis on verifying claims and reproducing results. It's why Robert K. Merton, the American sociologist who laid out an "ethos of science" in the nineteen-forties, included skepticism as a fundamental tenet. And it's why he insisted that science should be based on a pillar of communality, recognizing that every idea in science is built on the ideas of others, and should therefore belong to the scientific community. Knowledge shouldn't be owned by its immediate discoverer.

There's untold good that can be done by experimentation in the digital age. It can help us to understand the impact of screen time or the Like button on our well-being; to find and fix discriminatory practices; to identify ways of promoting healthier life styles. But where these experiments are being done away from public scrutiny, the ethos of science is compromised. The Big Tech companies can tell us their findings. I'm just not sure it's enough to take their word for it. ♦

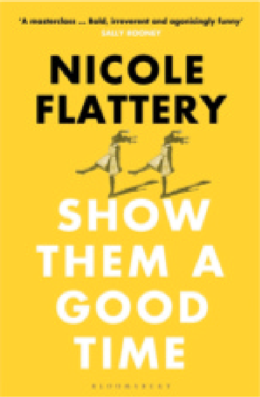
BRIEFLY NOTED

BROTHER & SISTER
A Memoir
DIANE KEATON

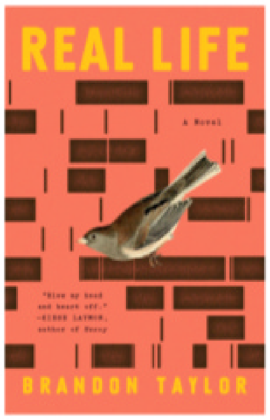
Brother & Sister, *by Diane Keaton (Knopf)*. "Revisiting Randy's past feels like an investigation composed of hundreds of clues, often leading nowhere," Keaton writes in this memoir about her younger brother, whose lifelong psychological issues have defied easy diagnosis. As a child, Randy saw ghosts; the sound of planes overhead would make him hide under their parents' bed. As an adult, he wrote poetry and became increasingly isolated: he drank, lived in squalor, and was tormented by sadistic fantasies. Keaton asks if she was guilty of failing her brother—"Or rather, how guilty was I?" There are no answers here, but this is a powerful account of one family's struggle with mental illness. Particularly poignant is Keaton's depiction of their mother—a "once-in-a-lifetime compassionate listener."



Driving While Black, *by Gretchen Sorin (Liveright)*. For African-Americans living under Jim Crow, public transportation was a ritual humiliation. This excellent history illuminates how car ownership provided a measure of safety and independence and also played a vital role in the civil-rights movement. (The Montgomery bus boycott, beginning in 1955, owed its success, in part, to a small fleet of privately owned station wagons.) Black motorists faced unique dangers and indignities on the road—racist law enforcement; denial of service by hotels, restaurants, and gas stations; and random acts of violence—but passed information and warnings by word of mouth. And, from 1937 to 1966, many consulted "The Negro Motorist Green Book," which, at its peak, had a circulation of more than two million copies.



Show Them a Good Time, *by Nicole Flattery (Bloomsbury)*. The precarious lives of contemporary women animate this début story collection. Flattery's characters—a woman having an affair with her boss, a woman who's forgotten how to make small talk—have tolerated their male partners and absurd jobs for too long, and are caught between caring and a sense that caring is pointless. The book's centerpiece is a long story in which two university students produce a satirical play about abortion, defying anyone in their way. Flattery puts across finely observed everyday details with an absurd sensibility and has a talent for one-liners, as when one student confesses, "I can't explain exactly what my disorder is but it prevents me from absorbing any knowledge into my brain."



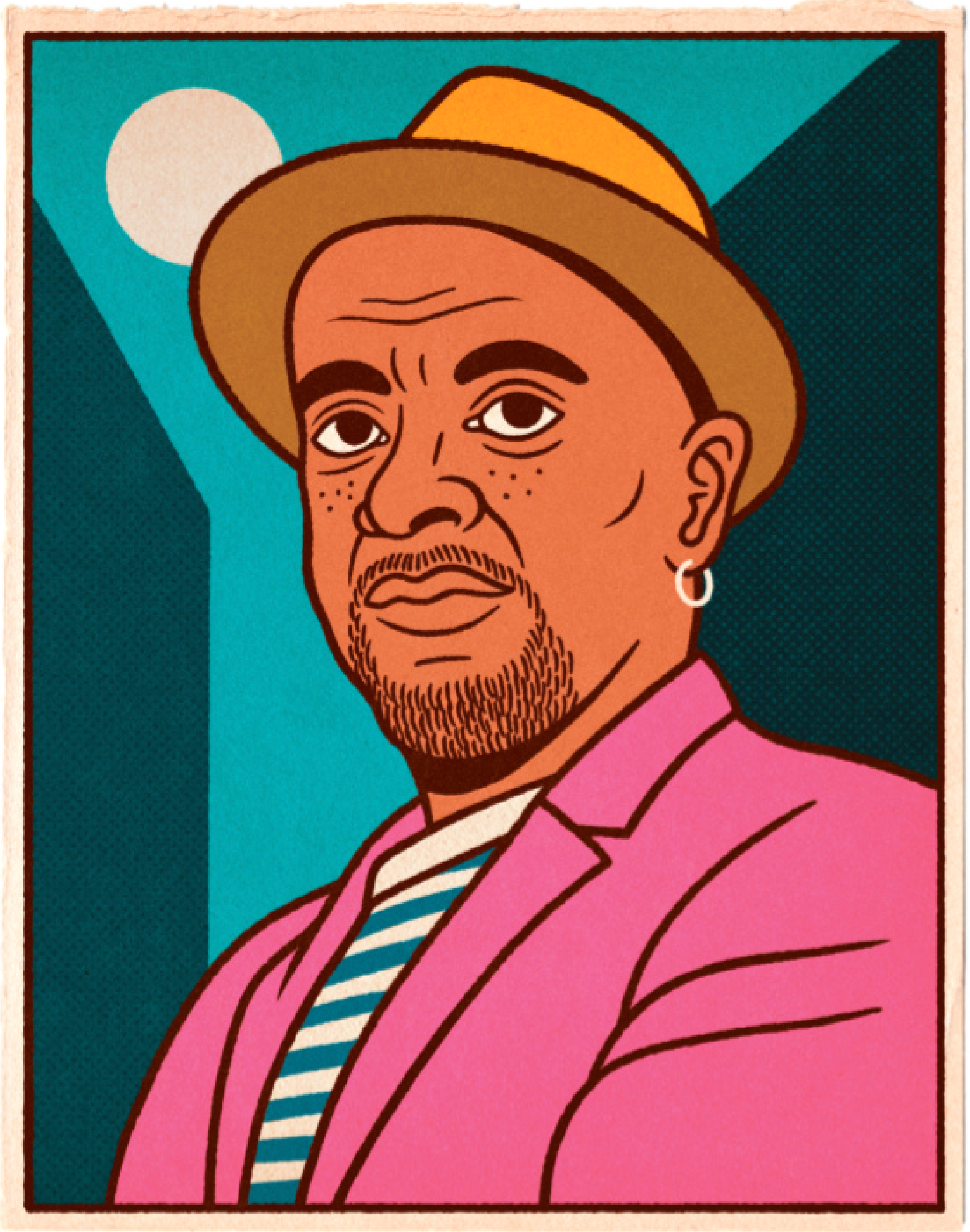
Real Life, *by Brandon Taylor (Riverhead)*. This début novel's protagonist, a biochemistry grad student, contemplates abandoning the stifling world of the lab—leaving behind the structure that has guided him out of an emotionally damaging childhood and also some relationships that kept him spiritually afloat. His lab mates are nice enough—until he gets in the way of their ambition, or reminds them of their roles in his mental anguish. This tension constantly threatens to flare into violence, whether physical or existential, but conflicts resist easy resolution. Taylor's prose brims with interiority, and is dark and tender, like a bruise.

BOOKS

IT ALL COMES BACK

Fate and fury in James McBride's novel "Deacon King Kong."

BY JONATHAN DEE



Some novels about city life are poems of alienation, interior portraits of the existentially isolate, but James McBride's vision of New York is one of overwhelming human profusion. His new novel, "Deacon King Kong" (Riverhead), set in what appears to be a fictionalized version of the Brooklyn housing project where McBride grew up, is crowded with characters whose backstories are crowded with more characters, all of their fates connected, in ways they know about and in ways they don't. It's a world where isolation seems like vanity; where one's intimate business is usually, somehow, everyone else's business, too; where even the attempted murder that begins the novel takes place in front of sixteen witnesses, many of whom know both shooter and victim personally.

"Deacon King Kong" is a nickname on top of a nickname: everyone in the Cause Houses knows the title character as Sportcoat. He is indeed a deacon, serving at the local Five Ends Baptist Church (though one of the novel's running jokes is that no one quite knows what a deacon's duties are, or how a man gets to be one), and he used to be the coach of the Cause's youth baseball team. Now he spends his days doing the occasional odd job and, primarily, drinking. King Kong is the name of the home brew he favors. It is September, 1969, during what will prove a miraculous season for baseball fans in the city, and Sportcoat, seventy-one years of age, is equally in need of divine intervention, as he reels from the death of his wife.

Then one day, almost as if possessed, Sportcoat goes to the Cause Houses plaza, walks up to a teen-ager named Deems Clemens, a onetime star of Sportcoat's youth baseball team who now sells heroin, and shoots him. Worse luck for Sportcoat, he succeeds only in taking off part of Deems's ear, leaving the young man in enraging pain, and poised to exact revenge. It makes no sense to anyone who knows Sportcoat that the harmless old man would do such a thing. Afterward, Sportcoat has no memory of the shooting and expresses a kind of condescending skepticism toward those who try to convince him that he was responsible. The first two chapters both end by pronouncing Sportcoat "a dead man"; you could say that the novel is concerned not only with solving the mystery of his violent act but with his prospects for resurrection.

Meanwhile, a few blocks away, a mobster known as the Elephant, a holdover from back when the neighborhood was mostly Italian, gets a visit from a man known as the Governor, who purports to be an old friend of the Elephant's late father. He's come to collect something that the Elephant's father was holding for him: a tiny, priceless bit of wartime plunder from Europe known as the Venus of Willendorf. No one has a clue where it is, apart from a cryptic old letter from Elephant père assuring the Governor that his treasure was safely "in the palm of God's hand."

These threads converge. Readers who understand that they are in a realm where everything makes sense, where nothing is mentioned at random—a plot, in other words—will figure out the Venus' whereabouts well ahead of the characters. That's O.K.; the satisfaction comes from seeing those characters, armed with less evidence than the reader possesses but guided by faith, close in on their goals, and from watching Sportcoat—whom a white character dismisses as the kind of drunk

Centered on a church, McBride's exuberant story has an air of parable.

ILLUSTRATION BY BENE ROHLMANN

"who dies at twenty and is buried at eighty"—somehow get saved, over and over again.

The sheer volume of invention in "Deacon King Kong"—on the level of both character (the first chapter alone introduces twenty individuals by name) and language—commands awe. Reading it is like watching a movie in which one's occasional impulse to ask questions is pleasantly swamped by the need to keep up with the pace of events. So comprehensive is the novel's vision of the Cause Houses that Chapter 7 is narrated in part from the perspective of a colony of ants. In order to better understand these ants and how they came to the Cause, we flash back to the year 1951; by the time we return to 1969, the story of the ants has somehow roped in the New York Knicks, "that great Polish-Lithuanian General Andrew Thaddeus Bonaventure Kosciuszko," and a stray German shepherd named Donald whose fur turned orange after it fell into the Gowanus Canal.

And the sentences! The prose radiates a kind of chain-reaction energy. After some chapters, you feel empathetically exhausted, in the way you might feel drained by watching an overtime football game. The experience of traversing a simple flashback paragraph is like trying to leap from stone to stone across a river, except occasionally one of them turns out to be not a stone after all but a lily pad, or a shadow, and into the river you go. Here's a description of Sportcoat's youth:

> Bad luck seemed to follow the baby wherever he went. . . . At age three, when a young local pastor came by to bless the baby, the child barfed green matter all over the pastor's clean white shirt. The pastor announced, "He's got the devil's understanding," and departed for Chicago, where he quit the gospel and became a blues singer named Tampa Red and recorded the monster hit song "Devil's Understanding," before dying in anonymity flat broke and crawling into history, immortalized in music studies and rock-and-roll college courses the world over, idolized by white writers and music intellectuals for his classic blues hit that was the bedrock of the forty-million-dollar Gospel Stam Music Publishing empire, from which neither he nor Sportcoat ever received a dime.

A cynical reader might question the sunniness of McBride's characterizations. The cops are bighearted, the mobsters are loyal. A character named Joaquin Cordero is introduced as "the only honest numbers runner in Cause Houses history." Everyone's better angels are generously foregrounded. And this angelic impulse extends to the action. Professional hit men are foiled in their attempts to kill the oblivious Sportcoat not once but three times, via accidental interventions that would have made Rube Goldberg blush. There are fortunate instances of mistaken identity, and other moments of plot-sustaining coincidence that may call to mind that classical contraption the deus ex machina.

But McBride has his eye less on the machina than on the deus. He begins the novel with a dedication to God, and he ends it with a second one. All his previous novels (most recently "The Good Lord Bird," a recipient of the National Book Award, in 2013) have been works of historical fiction—about the Second World War, about the era of American slavery. A work of fiction set in 1969 might count as historical, too, and this one is related to a history he has written about before: his 1995 memoir, "The Color of Water," was set in the Red Hook housing project, where he was raised. And yet McBride has described "Deacon King Kong" as a novel about a church, rather than about a housing project, and perhaps that spirit lends an element of parable to the plot's occasional unlikelihoods, making them seem not sentimental or convenient but challenging. They dare you to accept things you can't explain.

There is, though, another sound in "Deacon King Kong," an undertone to all the humor and serendipity. A consciously suppressed anger emerges only rarely, but often enough to make you read the comedy differently. It's as if any sentence in the book would, if allowed to flow all the way to its digressive end, empty into the pool of injustices that put these characters in the Cause Houses to begin with. When Sportcoat finally does remember the shooting, the revelation undams the kindly old deacon's "absolute, indestructible rage," in a way that casts the whole novel preceding it in a more complicated light. The fact that that light can be turned on and off is part of the complication.

And then there are those ants. Near the end of the exuberantly overdetailed ant flashback, you hit another one of those trick stones—a simple sentence that just keeps going, deeper and deeper, turning into an indictment that's both tangential and not:

> And there [the ants] stayed, a sole phenomenon in the Republic of Brooklyn, where cats hollered like people, dogs ate their own feces, aunties chain-smoked and died at age 102, a kid named Spike Lee saw God, the ghosts of the departed Dodgers soaked up all possibility of new hope, and penniless desperation ruled the life of the suckers too black or too poor to leave, while in Manhattan the buses ran on time, the lights never went out, the death of a single white child in a traffic accident was a page one story, while phony versions of black and Latino life ruled the Broadway roost, making white writers rich—*West Side Story*, *Porgy & Bess*, *Purlie Victorious*—and on it went, the whole business of the white man's reality lumping together like a giant, lopsided snowball, the Great American Myth, the Big Apple, the Big Kahuna, the City That Never Sleeps, while the blacks and Latinos who cleaned the apartments and dragged out the trash and made the music and filled the jails with sorrow slept the sleep of the invisible and functioned as local color.

In 2016, President Obama awarded McBride the National Humanities Medal, for "humanizing the complexities of discussing race in America." McBride's belief that those maddening "complexities" make a kind of sense that we can't always see appears to be unbroken in these less hopeful times. In "Deacon King Kong," narrative omniscience leaves room for despair, as it must, but its over-all energy never flags. Sometimes the most affirmative thing you can do, as a storyteller, is to service that story's momentum, in the hope that there's some just reward for everyone in the end.

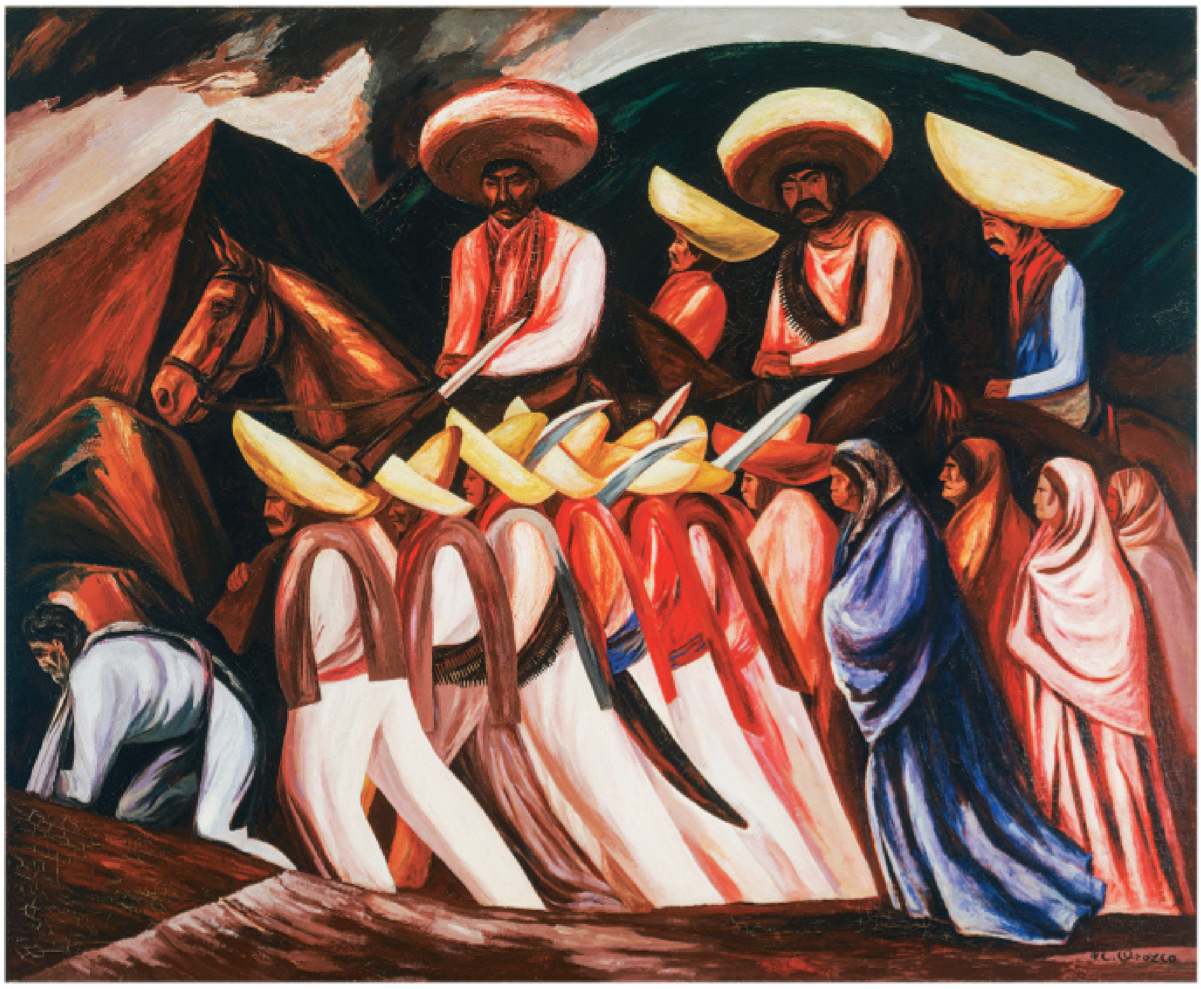
We associate tragedies with the operation of divine justice or divine will: hubristic human characters suffering the punishment of an angry god. But maybe it's the comic plot—where all the clues are there if you read them right, where murderers' hands are improbably stayed, where a "dead man" is given a new life—that more closely expresses belief. A comedy, no matter how frenetic on the surface, is an engine of patience, of faith in the idea that lost things will eventually be found. ♦

THE ART WORLD

WALL POWER

The influence of Mexico’s great muralists.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



José Clemente Orozco’s “Zapatistas,” from 1931, lyricizes the revolutionary force.

COURTESY MOMA. © ARS, NEW YORK

The title of a thumpingly great show at the Whitney, “Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945,” picks an overdue art-historical fight. The usual story of American art in those two decades revolves around young, often immigrant American aesthetes striving to absorb European modernism. A triumphalist tale composed backward from its climax—the postwar success of Abstract Expressionism—it brushes aside the prevalence, in the Depression thirties, of politically themed figurative art: social realism, more or less, which became ideologically toxic with the onset of the Cold War. What to do with the mighty legacy of the time’s big three Mexican painters, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros? As little as possible has seemed the rule, despite the seminal influence of Orozco and Siqueiros on the young Jackson Pollock. Granted, there’s the problem of appreciating muralists in the absence of their murals. (A mural is a picture that is identical with a wall, and a wall belongs to a building that, besides not being portable, has meanings of its own.) But, with some two hundred works by sixty artists and abundant documentary material, the Whitney curator Barbara Haskell reweaves the sense and the sensations of an era to bring it alive.

Start the story with Emiliano Zapata, the peasant leader from a village in the central state of Morelos, who was tricked into a military ambush and martyred in 1919. This was a year before the decade-long, staggeringly bloody Mexican Revolution, which had begun with an attempt to overthrow the dictatorial and oligarchic President Porfirio Díaz, finally culminated in the election of Álvaro Obregón. (At least a million of the country’s fifteen million citizens lost their lives.) The agrarian rebel Zapata became an iconic figure for a new order that was merging social reform with a celebration of folkways and traditions—in striking contrast to the urban-industrial character of the Russian Revolution. (Shifting views of the Soviet Union regularly roiled the Mexican intelligentsia, many of whom welcomed the exiled Leon Trotsky to the capital, in 1937, before some effectively condoned his murder by a Stalinist agent, in 1940.) Nearly every artist had a go at exalting Zapata for his deep rootedness in native soil as well as for his dashing militance. Orozco’s “Zapatistas” (1931) lyricizes the rural force. A “Zapatistas” made the following year, by Alfredo Ramos Martínez, conveys a lot with witty economy: a packed composition of overlapping sombreros affording incomplete glimpses of peasant faces and rifle barrels. It radiates a sort of ecstatic menace.

Ramos Martínez, who immigrated to Los Angeles in 1930, is one of a number of lesser-known artists who impress in the show’s opening sections. The Italian-born photographer Tina Modotti, who journeyed the opposite way, from Los Angeles to Mexico, in 1923, is represented with crisp images, including a still-life of a sickle, a loaded bandolier, and an ear of corn. But the exhibition centers on the three leaders of the mural movement and their galvanizing effects north of the border. The star, of course, is Rivera, whose panache in an epic style of sophisticated populism won him world fame. In 1931, he was given the newly founded Museum of Modern Art’s second monographic show (the first was devoted to Matisse) and created a remarkable suite of portable frescoes. Among them were a magnificent portrayal of Zapata appropriating the white horse of a slain foe and “The Uprising,” in which a woman with a baby defends a worker from a sword-wielding soldier. I once underrated that work, but this time it affected me with its cinematic immediacy. Rivera keeps looking better in retrospect, after a long period in which his standing declined while that of his wife, Frida Kahlo, soared. I prefer Kahlo myself, though by a narrower margin now. The show includes only two works by her. One jolts. The self-portrait “Me and My Parrots” (1941) communicates a force of personhood beyond that of any of the hundreds of other faces on view here.

Rivera notoriously enchanted American financiers and industrialists, engaging in a dizzying dance of co-optation that extended to adulatory coverage in *Forbes* and peaked with his masterpiece murals, completed in 1933, in the Detroit Institute of Arts, of a Ford plant in full-tilt operation. This celebrity proved tricky for him at home, where Siqueiros, among others, denounced him as a sellout to class enemies. Rivera countered by painting a head of Lenin into his grand mural suite for Rockefeller Center, in 1933. Ordered by Nelson Rockefeller to remove the Bolshevik, Rivera refused. (Light verse by E. B. White in this magazine had the mogul objecting, "After all/It's my wall," before it concluded, " 'We'll see if it is,' said Rivera.") The work was destroyed in 1934. The same year, Rivera painted a new version, "Man, Controller of the Universe," in Mexico City. The Whitney show features a full-sized (nearly sixteen feet high by thirty-seven and a half feet wide) digital reproduction of the surviving mural, printed on a single sheet of vinyl glued to a wall. I don't know what to make of that except as an instance of technical whoop-de-do. Much as I empathize with Haskell's yen for a pièce de résistance, I swear by the physical integrity of painting, here betrayed by a smooth-as-silk illusion.

Rivera inspired American painters to create tableaux of laboring or protesting workers (police brutality figures often) and of historical events and themes. The work of the African-American artist Charles White is notable; give an eye to his "Progress of the American Negro: Five Great American Negroes" (1939-40), which works such heroes as Booker T. Washington and Marian Anderson into a baroque panorama. The show also includes ten temperas from Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series," of 1940-41: little pictures, narrating the northward exodus of Southern blacks, that reverberate with intense color, clenched design, and a quiet power of conviction that makes much other work here seem forced and fustian.

But America already had a prominent public artist: the ebullient neo-Mannerist Thomas Hart Benton, who hailed Rivera until he was alienated by his Marxism. Benton's output might be termed liberal-nationalist with a heaping side order of Hollywood. His bravura series "American Historical Epic" (1924-27) has the virtue of featuring noble Indians along with the vice of casting them as perennial losers. He could be callous. But he was right on time for certain popular moods of the thirties—so much so that his reputation crashed soon thereafter. He has come to be mentioned most often as a teacher of Jackson Pollock—a status that happens to be at the beating heart of the Whitney show.

The young Pollock was a student, too, of Siqueiros, who was at once the mural movement's most adamant Stalinist (in 1940, he led a failed attempt, with machine guns, to assassinate Trotsky) and its most experimental, indeed avant-garde, painter. Pollock attended a workshop that Siqueiros conducted in New York, in 1936, teaching innovative techniques: using non-paint materials, airbrushing, and, among other heterodox procedures, dripping and pouring. Meanwhile, Pollock emulated Orozco's dark, fierce, rhythmic Expressionism to the point of making works that are almost—but not quite—hard to distinguish from it. Relatively neutral politically, Orozco favored mythological subjects in such explosively composed works as "Prometheus," a mural at Pomona College, in California, which the Whitney represents, at about half scale, in another digital reproduction. Juxtapositions of paintings by Orozco and Siqueiros with contemporaneous ones by Pollock amount to a riveting show within the show: a crucible in which the apolitical American found ways around the crushing authority of Picasso, Matisse, Miró, Mondrian, and other European paragons. The vehemence of the Mexicans matched his volcanic temperament; and the heft of their gestural forms showed him how to rival, while evading, the tinkered unities of Cubism. I recommend comparing and contrasting the seething intensity of Pollock's "Composition with Flames" (1936) with that of "The Fire" (1938), by Orozco, and Siqueiros's "The Electric Forest" (1939).

"Vida Americana" valuably augments standard histories of modern art. Without the Mexican precedents of amplified scale and passionate vigor, the development of Abstract Expressionism in general, and that of Pollock in particular, lacks crucial sense. As for the politics, consider the persistently leftward tilt of American art culture ever since—a residual hankering, however sotto voce, to change the world. ♦

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POP MUSIC

CLIP ART

The TikTok-ready sounds of Beach Bunny.

BY CARRIE BATTAN

On the video-sharing platform TikTok, there are nearly seventy-four million posts hashtagged #promqueen. Hundreds of thousands of these are set to a track of the same name, from 2018, by a young indie-rock band from Chicago called Beach Bunny. TikTok, which encourages users to post short, surrealist interpretations of memes and dance moves, has become an incubator of musical talent, or at least of persona and digital acumen. Earlier this year, it helped send the rapper Roddy Ricch's song "The Box"—which features a curious squeaking sound, perfect for TikTok—to the top of the *Billboard* charts. But, unlike the idiosyncratic hip-hop that typically takes hold on the platform, "Prom Queen" is a doleful ballad. The song dramatizes teen-age self-doubt and has the inverse effect of a pep talk. "Shut up, count your calories," Beach Bunny's front woman, a twenty-three-year-old recent college graduate named Lili Trifilio, sings in a disaffected tone. "I never looked good in mom jeans." TikTok users, most of whom are in their teens or early twenties, have used the song as a backdrop for videos both literal and abstract. In one, a young woman presents an array of prom dresses, prompting her followers to help her decide which to buy. In another, someone splices together short clips of the food she's eaten that day—quite literally counting her calories. One user attempts to follow a Bob Ross painting tutorial; another tries to cover up his face tattoos with makeup, sporting a sly grin.

Of all the confessional, female-fronted indie-rock bands to flourish in the past decade, Beach Bunny is perhaps the most shrewdly tailored to the whims of the social Internet, where everything, especially the misery and humiliation of youth, is molded into a bite-size piece of comic relief. On "Painkiller," a song from Beach Bunny's 2018 EP, also called "Prom Queen," Trifilio name-checks pharmaceuticals that might make her feel better: "I need paracetamol, tramadol, ketamine. . . . Fill me up with Tylenol, tramadol, ketamine." It sounds like it could be from the soundtrack of "Euphoria," HBO's breakout show about teen-age dereliction. Trifilio is a potent lyricist who tends toward despondency, but her songs are deceptively snackable—each is a two-minute burst of honey-butter melody, often with a title that incorporates hashtag-worthy slang.

Yet, despite Beach Bunny's pink bubble wrapping, the band's début album, "Honeymoon," which came out this month, outlines the silhouettes of despair and longing with an unusually refined emotional nuance. "Honeymoon" follows a relationship in its turbulent early stages. "Maybe we are getting too close," Trifilio sings on a song called "Cuffing Season." The title comes from a term for the coupling up that occurs during the winter months—a cloying reference that masks the song's subtle exploration of romantic uncertainty. "Sometimes I like being on my own/I'm afraid of winding up alone/But that's not love," Trifilio sings. Unlike many in her cohort, who favor lyrical complexity, Trifilio is exaggeratedly plainspoken. The strongest song on the album is "Rearview," which begins with Trifilio strumming a guitar and describing a growing space between her and a partner. Her lyrics are simple and blunt, as if she were teaching verb conjugation to a remedial English class: "You love me/I love you/You don't love me anymore/I still do."

Partly because of the band's name, Beach Bunny's music has occasionally been characterized as "beach rock" or "surf pop"—a handy way of indicating how palatable and sweet the songs are. In fact, the group hews more closely to indie-rock bands of the nineties and

The band's music is shrewdly tailored to the whims of the social Internet.

ILLUSTRATION BY SIOBHÁN GALLAGHER

two-thousands like Built to Spill and the Strokes, which filled the spaces between grunge, punk, and emo, and probably avoided the beach. Beach Bunny's tracks are not exactly innovative—most contain an uncomplicated chord progression, a frenzied drum explosion, and not much else. If Trifilio sounds like anyone, it might be the late Niall Quinn, of the Cranberries. Trifilio likes to add a light Celtic trill to her words to make them fit a musical measure; she sometimes turns the word "love" into "lay-ee-ohhve." This Quinnian tic can be heard in guitar rock everywhere these days, though this is probably an accident, not an intentional tribute. The Internet's memory is rapidly shortening. Beach Bunny may not even know that its name sounds like a reference to a time in the late two-thousands when indie-rock bands were naming themselves things like Beach Fossils and Wavves. When a journalist compared Trifilio to the grunge icon Liz Phair in an interview last year, she admitted to being unfamiliar with Phair's work.

Acts of earlier eras could more easily be traced to their predecessors, often by the artists' own admission, but Beach Bunny comes from a generation for which stylistic influence is absorbed through lifelong exposure to a mass jumble of online reference points. Trifilio got her start in music by performing acoustic-guitar covers and uploading them to YouTube, as so many of her peers did before TikTok began pulling aspiring talents into its slipstream. One song she covered was Katy Perry's "E.T.," a faintly industrial-sounding collaboration with Kanye West. In a track on "Honeymoon" called "Ms. California," Trifilio sings, "She's your girl / She's all in your pictures / California girl / I wish I was her." It's hard not to hear this song as a kind of garage-rock photo negative of Katy Perry's "California Gurls." An homage like this would have seemed incongruous in an earlier era of indie rock, but Trifilio's generation uses pop songwriting as a primary source rather than as a counterpoint, translating it effortlessly.

TikTok is a new platform, but its catchy, looping clips make use of an old music-industry trick. Psychologists and music-theory scholars have long studied the brain's response to repeated exposure to music. As early as 1903, Max Friedrich Meyer, a professor of psychoacoustics, showed that a piece of music's "aesthetic effect" for participants in a study was "improved by hearing the music repeatedly." In 1968, the social psychologist Robert Zajonc coined the term "mere-exposure effect" to describe this phenomenon. According to Zajonc's findings, appreciation of a song increased the more the subjects heard it, no matter how complex the music was or how it aligned with their personal tastes. This insight is the driving force behind the marketing of popular music in the modern era: FM radio stations and popular streaming playlists are most successful when they program a small pool of songs, inducing the mere-exposure effect as quickly as possible.

On TikTok, the length of a video is restricted to sixty seconds, but most clock in at less than half a minute. The app allows a seamless scroll through videos, demanding rapid-fire consumption. It also groups together clips that contain the same song, encouraging you to listen over and over again. The app's success at making hits is partly due to its ability to accelerate the mere-exposure effect, making songs familiar at warp speeds. Without TikTok, it's unlikely that a song like "Prom Queen" could have reached the velocity it did. The official video for the song now has more than seven million views on YouTube.

With increased exposure comes increased scrutiny, and the micro-virality of "Prom Queen" caused some listeners—maybe ones who caught only a snippet of the track—to question its message. In one verse, Trifilio sings, "I've been starving myself / Carving skin until my bones are showing." Last summer, Trifilio pinned a lengthy comment underneath the song's YouTube video. "Since this video is blowing up I feel the need to address something," she wrote. "The lyrics are a criticism on modern beauty standards and the harmful effects beauty standards can have on people. . . . You are already a Prom Queen, you are already enough." The message was about two hundred words—a longer piece of writing than any Beach Bunny song. ♦

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THE NEW YORKER

THE THEATRE

COOLED JETS

Ivo van Hove's grim take on "West Side Story."

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

The Belgian director Ivo van Hove is invariably referred to as "avant-garde," but, considering that he has spent more than two decades making theatre in this country, including three recent productions on Broadway, that thorny honorific no longer really fits. The avant period is over; he is simply part of the garde, influential and much imitated, not least by himself. Van Hove is celebrated for his austere, violent, video-heavy stagings, which attempt to reveal the hidden layers of classic texts. When it was announced that he would be taking on "West Side Story," among the most beloved and fraught of American musicals, the buzz began. Now, after more than a year of preparation and no shortage of complications—two injured stars, one of whom had to drop out; a delayed opening; a nightly rally, held in front of the theatre, to protest the casting, as Bernardo, of Amar Ramasar (a New York City Ballet principal who was fired from and then reinstated to that company after sharing nude photos of a colleague), a foreseeable controversy that the producers have responded to in stiff, baffled fashion—van Hove's "West Side Story" has at last opened (at the Broadway). The production is an infuriating example of what happens when a powerful style calcifies into shtick—infuriating because so much that is exciting, even revelatory, here is crushed beneath the director's insistence on a vision that feels narrow and doctrinaire. He wants to make us see an iconic work with new eyes, but all we can see is him.

The play, loosely updated to the present, opens in moody silence, as a line of young men files onto the vast, naked stage. Their faces are projected by video camera onto the enormous wall behind them, and the orchestra strikes up its first notes. The menace and the delight of Leonard Bernstein's score feel irrepressible, but these boys know how to repress—to "play it cool," as they later sing. They are in street wear, immaculate sneakers and glossy track jackets, sweatsuits, and beanies (An D'Huys did the appealing costume design); they have branded their necks with tattoos reading "Jet for Life." Another line of boys appears, edgy and coiled—the Sharks—and a fight breaks out. Someone is knifed; somebody else films the assault with a smartphone, and shaky footage of the grimacing boy clutching his bloody ear fills the backdrop as bodies thrash below. The melee is interrupted by the nasty Lieutenant Schrank (Thomas Jay Ryan), and the Sharks scatter, leaving the Jets to regroup and pledge their allegiance to themselves:

> When you're a Jet,
> You're a Jet all the way
> From your first cigarette
> To your last dyin' day.

Stephen Sondheim's lyrics, imprinted on generations of American brains, are as thrilling as ever, but when the Jets' leader, Riff (Dharon E. Jones), sings them they are not so much a declaration of solidarity as a threat. He and his crew are far from the carefree showboaters of the original, 1957 Broadway production or the 1961 movie, snapping and leaping in Jerome Robbins's indelible choreography. Those Jets were inventing the American teen-age experience, coming alive to the possibility of power and control in a world where adult authority had crumbled; their bragging felt childish, all hot talk, until, suddenly, the game got real. These Jets know that they have signed a death pact. The turn is typical of van Hove, who is determined to snuff out any lightness that might temper the full-blown tragedy to come. (To that end, he has cut the song "I Feel Pretty" and trimmed Arthur Laurents's sleek book, already one of the shortest in Broad-

ILLUSTRATION BY XAVIERA ALTENA

way history, to keep the play to an intermissionless hour and forty-five minutes.) There's no joy to be found on these streets.

But what streets are they? As the Jets discuss their plans to challenge the Sharks at the school dance that evening, the video screen shows a dead-end block lined with shuttered warehouses, a nowhere land that could be on the edge of any city in the industrialized world. (Van Hove's partner and frequent collaborator, Jan Versweyveld, did the scenic and lighting design; Luke Halls did the video design.) The camera advances in a slow dolly shot, producing the weightless, gliding momentum of a first-person shooter game. This moving streetscape, like others that occur throughout the play, bears no perspectival relationship to the actors on the stage; it shrinks and dislocates them. When the Jets sing, van Hove projects recorded footage of the cast gallivanting around Brooklyn, chewing on gold chains and mugging for the camera in pastiches of rap-music videos, which dwarfs the actors with their own gigantic images. In the next scene, he plays peekaboo with them as they disappear into Doc's drugstore, a bodega cut into the back wall that looks as tiny as a doll house, and the action is live-streamed onscreen above the abandoned stage. As a metaphor—for the insignificance of these characters' lives in a vast, hostile world, perhaps?—the technique is banal. As a theatrical device, it is a ludicrous waste, verging on an insult to the actors, who can't hope to compete with the billboard-size versions of themselves that loom over their heads.

This is all the more disappointing because they are a gorgeous cast, youthful, fresh—more than thirty actors are making their Broadway débuts—and physically spectacular, especially in Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's choreography, which, with its sharply thrown elbows and triangular formations, closes the gap between modernist constructivism and TikTok preening. When Tony (Isaac Powell) appears, he is lithe and jittery, jabbing the air with his hand as if he wanted to freestyle, though he is contractually obliged to sing one of the simplest and most sublime songs in musical theatre, "Something's Coming," which he does, beautifully, with a supple, mellow voice. Shereen Pimentel's Maria is another revelation. In body and attitude, Pimentel is the welcome opposite of Natalie Wood, who fixed the role in the American mind as a virgin verging on sainthood. This Maria is a girl with curves and spirit, and one of the things that the production gets right is the puppyish attraction between the young lovers, who touch each other with a hunger tinged by natural self-consciousness. The senselessness of the tragedy that befalls them is not that they were destined to be together forever. It's that they could have helped each other get out, grow up, and learn how to be free.

Van Hove, who auditioned more than a thousand actors, has done something unusual and intriguing in his casting. The Puerto Rican Sharks are played by Latino actors, which is a relief; we are far from the miserable days of brownface. (Yesenia Ayala, who moves like a knife across the stage, is a highlight as Anita; Ramasar, leaning heavily on a gluey "Spanish" accent, is the weak link.) Meanwhile, the Jets, originally a white gang made up of the sons and grandsons of Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants—"an anthology of what is called 'American,'" Laurents wrote in the script—are a diverse bunch; in fact, the white actor Ben Cook, who was first cast as Riff, was replaced by the talented Jones, who is black, when Cook was injured. With apologies to Cook, that may have been a stroke of luck, since it's more conceivable that white street kids would pay allegiance to a black leader—there's that haunted idea of American "cool" again, inextricable from white obsession with African-American culture—than the other way around.

And yet the casting introduces tangled layers of complexity that van Hove has either misunderstood or ignored. The lyrics of the film version of "America"—in which Anita and the Shark women sing of their love of the country's capitalist conveniences, and the men sing of its brutality and bankrupt racism—remain as current as Twitter discourse, if, mercifully, a lot cleverer. "Life is all right in America," the women sing, and the men reply, "If you're all white in America," but I didn't hear that line in this production, maybe because it makes less sense for the Sharks to sing it when it no longer applies to their adversaries. Meanwhile, the production has confusingly kept references to both gangs' immigrant status. "Who asked you to come here?" Riff says to Bernardo; Bernardo's retort—"Who asked *you*?"—has a bitter, unintended irony in the context of African-American history.

Or take the classic comic number "Officer Krupke," which van Hove reframes as an indictment of the carceral state and accompanies with a bleak video montage of young men being humiliated and abused by the police. Naturally, this plays to big applause, but the effect is obvious and pandering, effacing the specificity of the characters' experience in favor of generic sociological observations. Changing the tone of the song, which is performed here with spitting fury, would have been enough. The dark side of the American Dream is not a subtext of "West Side Story," waiting to be excavated through appallingly didactic images—like that of the Puerto Rican and American flags strung up on a chain-link fence, which appears during "America," or, worse, an aerial shot of the border wall with Mexico that looks like something out of a dystopian travel infomercial. The critique has been right there on the surface all along.

Van Hove used to wage war on naturalism. Naturalism, however, has caught up to him. It is no longer strange to see the world filtered through a screen; that's how we do most of our seeing. Here and there, we get startling glimpses of what van Hove could do, if he were to return to eye level and reground himself in the idiom of the stage. The rumble that closes the first act is one such exquisite moment. The screen goes blessedly dark, and we are free to focus on the enraged, passionate bodies that fly and claw at one another, as lightning crackles through the theatre and an unseen sky opens to release torrents of rain. It's like witnessing an act of God—clear, spectacular, and all too brief. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

SUPERIOR BREEDS

"The Call of the Wild" and "Emma."

BY ANTHONY LANE

After a period of reflection, lasting as long as four seconds, I decided to watch "The Call of the Wild," a new film of Jack London's novel, at a dog-friendly screening. There really was no choice. The opportunity to see a pug fall into a bucket of popcorn doesn't come along that often, and you should grab it with both paws. And don't worry about the disturbance. There isn't any.

A canine audience, I can now confirm, is infinitely calmer and more respectful than its human equivalent. No texting, no soda-sucking, and no chatter, save for a thoughtful yap every now and then. In the row behind me was Paulie, the most—perhaps the only—well-behaved cockapoo in captivity. "He'll fall asleep before the movie starts," his owner predicted, and so it proved. The seat in front was occupied by Gatsby, a Chinese crested, though whether he was of the hairless or the powderpuff variety was hard to tell in the dark. Sometimes my view was obscured by his topknot, but, that aside, Gatsby was great. Afterward, I was introduced to a French bulldog named Daffodil, aged eleven months, and assured that she had been a model of propriety throughout. Try taking a one-year-old child to a full-length film and see how you get on.

The hero of the movie, as of the novel, is Buck, a cross between a St. Bernard and what London describes as a "Scotch shepherd," presumably a fervid Presbyterian. Buck, a family pet in California, is kidnapped and sold, learns the ropes of pulling a sled in the frozen North, and winds up as the free-running master of himself—"a thing that preyed, living on the things that lived." Such was the template laid down on the page, and, by and large, it's faithfully followed onscreen. The one major tweak, introduced by the writer, Michael Green, and the director, Chris Sanders, involves the demeanor of Hal (Dan Stevens), a greenhorn who assumes brief ownership of Buck. In the book, he is cruel but useless; in the film he becomes a villain so melodramatic, with his bristling mustache, his lunatic stare, and his suit of scarlet plaid, that Chaplin would have refused him entry to "The Gold Rush."

Chris Sanders directs the latest adaptation of Jack London's novel.

Then, there is Harrison Ford. When I first saw his name on the poster for "The Call of the Wild," I didn't know whether he would be playing John Thornton, the kindly adventurer who takes Buck under his wing, or Buck himself. One thing's for certain: Ford is indisputably the shaggier dog. His beard would be the envy of any husky, and, as befits his growl, he serves as the narrator, too, intoning the sort of gee-whiz buildup ("Skagway, Alaska, gateway to the Yukon") that I associate with old travelogues on TV. Alas, poor Thornton is saddled with a maudlin backstory, about a son of his who died and a marriage that collapsed. Isn't there enough mushing in this tale already? Don't the filmmakers realize that Ford can supply the necessary sorrow with his gaze and his voice alone? Compare Robert Redford, in "All Is Lost" (2013), as another lonely grump; he never revealed what private storms had driven him to sea, as a solo yachtsman, and he was right not to. It was the quest that counted. The rest was not our business.

What really stifles this "Call of the Wild," oddly enough, is Buck. In previous versions (with Clark Gable as Thornton, say, in 1935, or Charlton Heston, in 1972), dogs were played by dogs. Their agents wouldn't have it any other way. The newfangled Buck, however, is unreal, from tail tip to snout; the fangling was done by computer, though Terry Notary—recently seen in "The Square" (2017), mimicking a crazed ape—provided a visual blueprint, performing Buckishly alongside Ford. The result is remarkable, yet it's still a hairbreadth away from credible, and I reckon that the pooches in the cinema could tell the difference. They could spy a big Buck, and they could hear the rustle of his digital fur, but they couldn't smell him. Maybe that's why they kept so quiet.

To return to London's novel these days, and to read of Buck's desire to "wash his muzzle to the eyes in warm blood," is quite a shock. Was a more savage text ever approved for use in schools? First published in 1903, it remains ferally fast and lithe, the teeth of the prose barely blunted by the years, and there's something prophetic, at the start of a warring century, in London's

ILLUSTRATION BY JON McNAUGHT

vision of civilization molting away at speed—"the decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence." That's Buck, forgetting his former self and learning to swipe food, but it could be any man in a similar fix.

Little of that struggle persists in the current film, which softens everything it touches. Mortal peril gives way to slapstick; atavistic fears are reduced to a quizzical cock of the head; and, as for Buck, he's brave, he's loyal, and he's about as forbidding as Scooby-Doo. As I left the screening, I bumped into Zeus, an Alaskan malamute of lupine proportions. Though a gentle soul, he had immense self-possession and a magnificent coat, and, if it came to a straight fight with Buck—not London's Buck but the one we'd just been watching—my money would be on Zeus. To be honest, even a Chinese crested powderpuff would be in with a chance.

The fact that the new Jane Austen adaptation is titled not "Emma" but "Emma." should be taken, I imagine, as a punctuational joke about period drama. The script is by Eleanor Catton, the author of "The Luminaries," and the director is Autumn de Wilde. Until now, she has been famed for her music videos and her photographs of bands, including Death Cab for Cutie. Ideal training for the world of Regency England.

Anya Taylor-Joy plays Emma Woodhouse, "handsome, clever, and rich." At the mellow age of twenty-one, Emma is an old hand at both scrutinizing and choreographing the romantic endeavors of other people. Or so she likes to think, though her neighbor, senior, and friend Mr. Knightley (Johnny Flynn) would beg to differ. To him, she is a meddler. No good, he believes, will come of her intrusions, especially in the case of Harriet Smith (Mia Goth), a young lady of nice comportment but unknown parentage. Guided, or misguided, by Emma, Harriet spurns the hand of a mere farmer and aims for seemlier targets. There is Mr. Elton (Josh O'Connor), the local vicar, who, like Mr. Collins, in "Pride and Prejudice," reminds us that Austen could, for the daughter of a rector, be withering about men of God; Frank Churchill (Callum Turner), an incoming cad with thin eyes, beneath whose layers of waistcoat lurks either a heart of flint or, more likely, no heart at all; and even, yes, Knightley himself.

This is one of those films which begin haltingly and, bit by bit, develop a smooth stride. The early sequences are peremptory and pastel-hued, with a jaunty score and a whiff of the fashion show. The haberdashery in Emma's village is a decorous riot of silks and trimmings, but so is the home that she shares with her father (Bill Nighy), a first-class hypochondriac. (In one lovely shot, he is surrounded by so many screens, each designed to fend off a nonexistent draft, that all you can see is his head.) Fans of Sofia Coppola's "Marie Antoinette" (2006) will be in heaven, as will anyone who labors under the impression that being alive in Austen's day was like dwelling inside a doll's house, or a hatbox.

Yet something happens. Much as the heroine of Max Ophüls's "The Earrings of Madame de . . ." (1953) falls in love with her partner in the course of a single waltz, so Emma and Mr. Knightley, hitherto content with badinage, surprise themselves into emotional gravity, during a dance—in closeup, to be exact, as their hands interlock. The movie continues to find strength in minor moments, as in the picnic scene, on a hillside, when Emma oversteps the mark and insults Miss Bates (Miranda Hart), whose only fault is a surplus of good will. When I saw the film, there was a sharp communal intake of breath around me; thanks to Hart, we share in the gust of confusion and hurt that crosses the victim's face.

In the wider scheme of things, of course, a foolish remark, tossed from one genteel person to another, with servants hovering in the background, couldn't matter less. But Austen knew that, like it or not, we are stuck in a narrower scheme, and that our fleeting follies matter a great deal. That is why "Emma" worked so well when transplanted to a high school, in "Clueless" (1995), and why a reboot of that movie, laced with the toxins of social media, would be close to unendurable. De Wilde's film is a more clueful affair, and Flynn (soon to star in a bio-pic of David Bowie) makes an arresting Knightley—more bruiser than smoothie, with a hinterland of unhappiness. He proposes, eventually, beneath the spreading glories of a horse-chestnut tree in flower. The doll's house has been put away, and nature is back in vogue. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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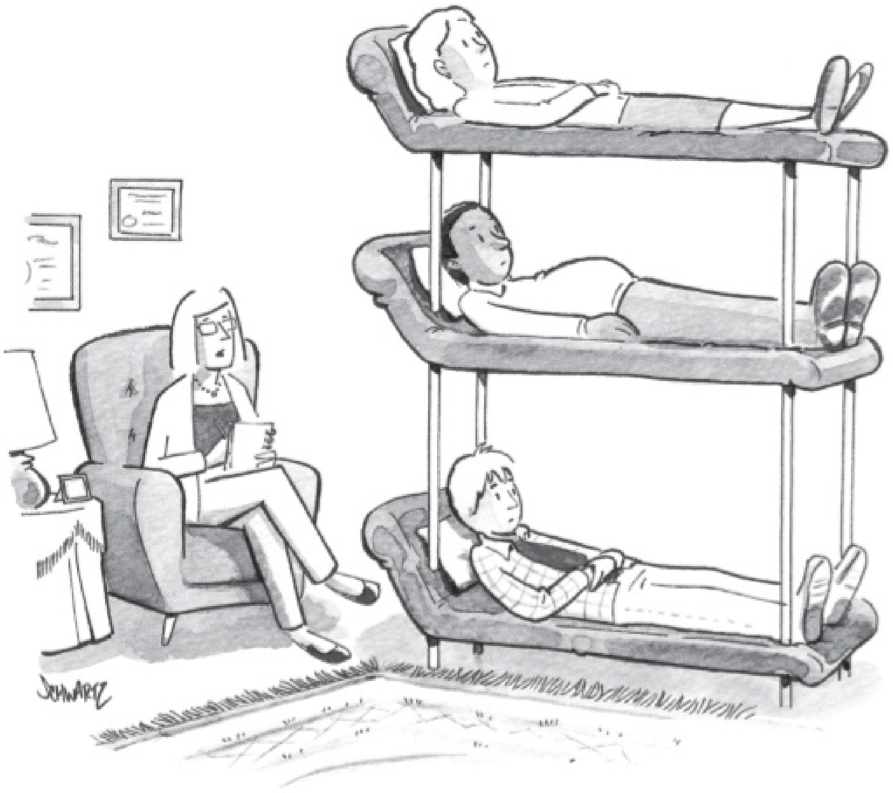
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Benjamin Schwartz, must be received by Sunday, March 1st. The finalists in the February 10th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 16th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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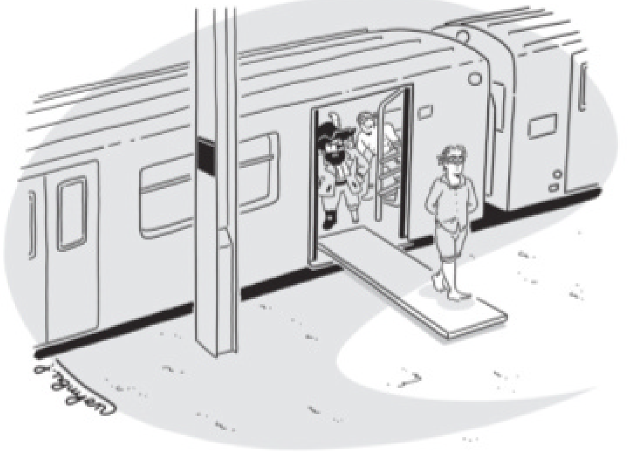
THE FINALISTS

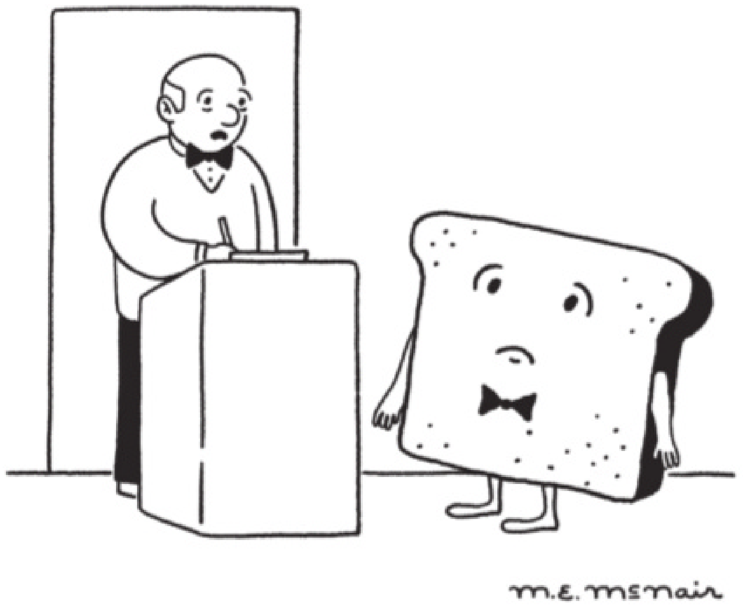


“No one crosses the Pirates of Penn Station.”
Paul Nesja, Mount Horeb, Wis.

“Transfer to the F train and that'll take you right to the ocean. Then jump in that.”
Jack Hackett, Los Angeles, Calif.

“Wait till he finds out this isn't his stop.”
Ben Hancock, Lexington, Ky.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“You're in luck. A slot for you just opened up in our kitchen.”
Sean Kirk, Bellingham, Wash.

> “When my mom was diagnosed with cancer, I wanted her to have access to the best treatments available.”

SONEQUA MARTIN-GREEN
Stand Up To Cancer Ambassador

Photo By
MATT SAYLES

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